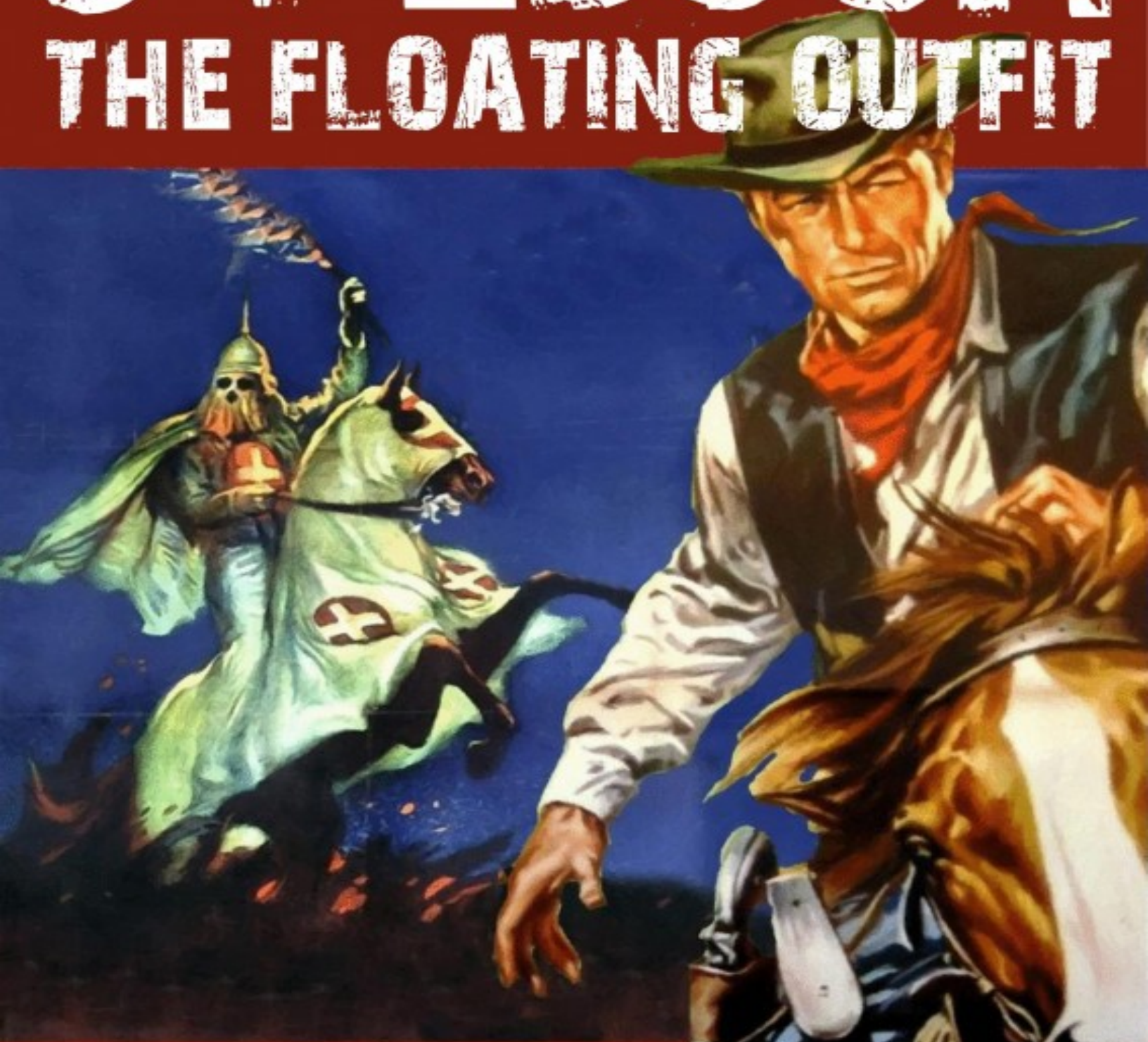
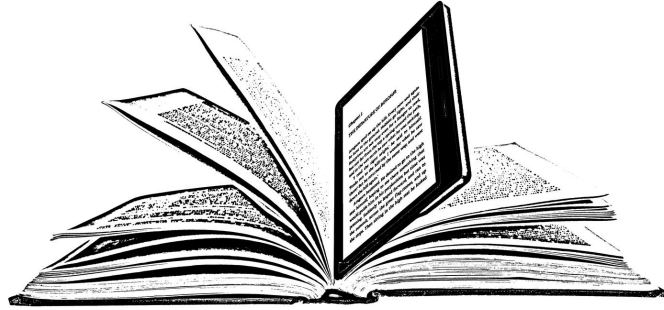


J T EDSON

THE FLOATING OUTFIT



THE HOODED RIDERS

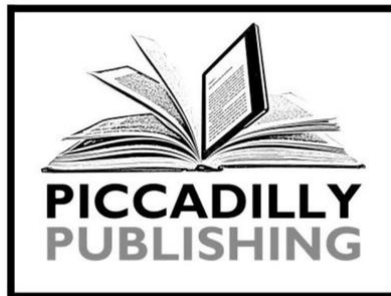


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J. T. EDSON

**THE FLOATING OUTFIT 9:
THE HOODED
RIDERS**



2017

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It all began when young Wes Hardin stepped up to a wrestling booth to try his strength against big, brawny Negro Sam. Within a few minutes a vicious gunfight had developed, and then Wes was on the run, branded a murderer—and without a single witness left alive to testify to his innocence. Then he met his cousin, Dusty Fog and with the Floating Outfit—Mark Counter and the Ysabel Kid—took up the fight against the evil corruption which had laid its hand on Wes Hardin!

***For Sergeant 'Ding' Dingley, R.A.V.C.
in the hope that he always has a
blanket handy.***

***Part One - The Saga of Rocket
Robbins***

One - Like Finding Money in the Street

‘Come on now, you fortunate Texas gents! Step right up and try your luck. All you have to do is throw Sam here off his feet and win yourself ten shining Yankee dollars.’

Attracted by the shouting, various citizens of Bonham, Fannin County’s seat, halted, listened then moved towards the sound to see what it had to offer. The sight of the small, two-horse wagon standing before the Pronghorn Saloon and carrying the words ‘Dr. Cleek’s Voodoo Tonic’ painted on its canopy, told them roughly what to expect. Like many another small Texas town, Bonham saw little professional entertainment other than that given by sellers of spurious medicines as a means of gathering a crowd.

‘Come on now, gents,’ the speaker went on. ‘Do I see a challenger to wrestle Sam? I’ll make it easy for you. If you stretch him on the ground at all, I’ll hand over the money.’

If the speaker had legal right to the title of ‘Doctor’, he certainly did not look the part. Middle-sized, wiry, with a thin, sly face, he wore a derby hat, loud check suit, fancy bow tie and city boots. Finishing his second challenging speech, he looked around in a hopefully expectant manner.

At Cleek's side, the big, brawny Negro's flattened, coarse face twisted in a mocking sneer. Standing flexing his bulging biceps, clad in a sleeveless undershirt and ragged levis pants, Sam's great muscular development showed to its best advantage. So much so that while almost every man present could have found use for ten Yankee dollars, shining or otherwise, nobody appeared willing to make a try at winning it.

More than a chance of being defeated held back possible challengers in the watching crowd. The War Between the States had ended and the South lay under the heel of grasping carpetbaggers using official positions to line their pockets; or in the hands of Radical Republicans determined to avenge themselves on the supporters of the Confederacy who had dared to oppose their lofty ideals.

Under the prevailing conditions a Texan knew he must walk carefully in any dealings with a Negro. On becoming a part of the United States, the then Independent Republic of Texas carried out its agreement to disband the Ranger battalions which served as army and law enforcement organizations. With the War over, the Union-appointed Governor Davis formed the State Police to replace the Rangers; using Negroes led by white men who hated Texans. Having seen examples of its brand of justice, no Texans wanted to fall foul of the corrupt, inefficient law enforcement body provided for their 'protection'. One of the quickest ways to find trouble with the State Police was to come into conflict with a colored man for any reason.

‘Come on now, gents!’ Cleek yelled when nobody responded. ‘Here’s a real easy chance to make some money. Unless Sam’s had his daily dose of my famous Voodoo Tonic, he’s as weak as a new-born-babe. Wrestling him’s so easy, it’s like finding money in the street.’

‘Looks like these here peckerwoods ain’t got no fight left in ‘em at all, Massa Cleek,’ Sam rumbled, looking at the all-white crowd with mocking contempt.

A slight frown creased Cleek’s brow and he darted a warning glance which bounced off the Negro’s broad back. There were times when Cleek felt he should end this patrnership with Sam. Never a cheerful or amiable man, the Negro grew surly and truculent when drunk. Reading the signs, Cleek wondered if Sam had been drinking while riding in the back of the wagon. Perhaps it would be better to call off the show, or take it down to the Negro section of town. Yet none of the crowd seemed to be taking serious exception to hearing the Negro’s derogatory name for white Southerners. Taking heart, Cleek decided to make one more attempt to find a challenger. If he failed, he could always go to the less profitable neighborhood that housed Bonham’s colored community.

‘Naw, it’s not that, Sam,’ he said, dropping coins from one hand to the other. ‘The folks here’re all so rich they don’t need to try for my money. Even if it is shining silver dollars and not in paper.’ The sight and sound of the money made one member of the crowd look more intently, then move forward. Tall as the Negro, although much slimmer, he had

black hair and a tanned, lean young face with a cheery grin. From the gray Stetson hat sitting at just the right jack-deuce angle over his off eye to the high-heeled, spur-decorated boots on his feet, his clothing spelled Texas cowhand. A tightly rolled bandanna trailed along ends over his shirt. His levis pants hung outside the boots, cuffs turned permanently up. Around his waist swung a gunbelt, walnut-handled 1860 Army Colts riding butt forward in contoured holsters designed to allow a real fast draw.

‘Reckon I’ll have a whirl at it,’ he said.

‘Easy there, Wes,’ warned the speaker’s companion, a stocky brown haired cowhand also in his late teens. ‘That Negro looks meaner’n a razorback hawg stopping his tusks on a fence rail and stronger’n a grizzly b’ar.’

‘Shucks now, Flip,’ grinned the contender. ‘It’s all for fun. Anyways, Cousin Dusty done taught me a couple of tricks to use again big fellows. Hi there, doctor, can I have a go at this finding money in the street?’

‘That’s Parson Hardin’s boy, John Wesley,’ a townsman breathed to his neighbor. ‘Trust him to take that feller up.’

‘Parson’s sons’re allus the wildest,’ replied the other man.

In Wes Hardin’s case, the wildness stemmed less from being a parson’s son than out of the fact that he and his companion were paying their first visit to a town in over a month. Since his last visit to Bonham, Wes had worked between twelve and eighteen hours a day on a cattle ranch. So, like most of his kind, he tended to act a mite wild on the rare occasions when he reached what in Texas classed as

civilization. Certainly he was no drunken, bullying trouble-causer; merely a young man who worked very hard and made the most of the little time left for his leisure.

True, Wes had taken part in a wild horse race through town the previous evening, displayed his skill by roping the bartender of the Pronghorn Saloon in passing—releasing his rope before it tightened between saddle and victim—and shot a couple of balls as they skidded across the saloon's pool table. No real harm had been done and he paid triple the cost of the balls to replace those damaged by his bullets.

If a rope, horse and gun often found use in a cowhand's fun it was through necessity. Mostly he owned nothing else. Nor did the fact that a cowhand often showed considerable skill in handling his gun mean he sought to become a killer. Rather it stemmed from that most basic of human emotions, self-preservation. In frontier Texas a man could not call upon the Army or law enforcement bodies to protect his life or property, so he developed the ability to defend his own.

So Wes' undoubted competence in handling his guns found few critics among other Texans. Properly channeled such talents were of great use to the community; and so far nothing in Wes' actions led people to believe he would use them for anything but good.

Unbuckling his gunbelt, Wes hung it over the saloon's hitching rail. He winked at Flip and walked towards Cleek, grinning amiably.

‘A challenger!’ boomed the medicine man. ‘Just remember, friend, all you have to do is throw Sam from his feet and you win ten dollars.’

‘He wouldn’t’ve been drinking that there Voodoo Tonic just now, would he?’ asked Wes, willing to help Cleek along if he could.

‘Not that I know of. But it’s so tasty and nutritious that he can’t resist sneaking a nip.’

Sam studied the slim cowhand with cold eyes. Only rarely did a white man accept the challenge and when it happened he enjoyed himself to the full. Few men he had met could equal his strength and he always ensured himself of an edge over any challenger.

‘Shake, white boy,’ he offered, extending a large black hand.

Still grinning, Wes held out his hand to comply. Instantly the Negro clamped hold of it in a crushing grip. Even as pain knifed into Wes, he saw the Negro begin a significant movement. Up came Sam’s left hand to grasp Wes’ right elbow. Then Sam pivoted round, carrying the trapped arm over his right shoulder. The right hand opened and rose to catch hold of Wes’ shoulder as Sam leant forward and bent his knees.

Feeling his body strike Sam’s buttocks and then begin to rise, Wes knew he had fallen a victim to a flying mare throw. However he lacked the time to counter it by side-stepping and avoiding being raised from the ground. The watching

crowd saw Wes pass over the Negro's shoulder and plummet downwards.

Always before Sam found the trick successful. Taken by surprise, the victim flew through the air, to be released and allowed to fall. Invariably he landed hard enough to jolt the wind from his body, if no worse, and lost all interest in trying to win the ten dollars. Everything appeared to be going to plan. Sam decided as he opened his hands and let Wes fall.

Only the trick failed to achieve its full purpose. While Wes had been taken by surprise, he was a good horseman and knew how to fall when pitched off by a bad one. Instinctively he relaxed his body, breaking the force of his landing on his hands and the balls of his feet. Then he twisted over and his hands stabbed out with the speed he showed when drawing a gun. The right caught Sam's left ankle and the palm of the left pressed against the trapped leg's knee. Shoving back on the knee, he hauled forward at the ankle. It was Sam's turn to receive a surprise. A howl of mingled amazement and fury broke from him as he toppled over and landed with a crash on his back.

'Yahoo, Wes!' whooped Flip. 'It looks like you done won his feller's ten shining ole Yankee dollars.'

'Looks that way,' agreed Wes, bouncing to his feet while the crowd hooted with laughter. 'One each, Sam, Want to try for best of three?'

Shaking his head in a dazed manner, the Negro rolled on to hands and knees then started to rise. Never had any man

tumbled him in such a manner, or with so much ease and the laughter of the crowd increased his fury. All too well he could imagine what Cleek would say should ten dollars change hands. So Sam lurched erect and charged at Wes, big hands reaching for him.

‘Don’t let him get hold of you, Wes!’ yelled one of the crowd.

It seemed that the advice fell on deaf ears. Then at the last moment Wes sidestepped the rush. Stabbing up his hands, he caught Sam’s right wrist, carried it up over his head as he pivoted and brought it down again. Thrown off balance, the Negro felt his feet leave the ground and he came down on it hard.

‘Looks like he hadn’t sneaked a drink of your tonic, doctor,’ Wes grinned, releasing the wrist.

A mixture of fury and worry creased Cleek’s face, for he knew all too well the Negro’s temper. Nor did he care for the idea of parting with ten dollars, even though they had been fairly won. Before he could make any reply to Wes’ comment, he saw Sam getting up.

Snarling with rage, the Negro made his feet. He reached into his right hip pocket and slid a cut-throat razor from its leather sheath. Out came the wicked weapon, to be flicked open with practiced ease. The sun glinted on shining steel, sending a warning to Wes. Only just in time for Sam struck fast and in a manner that showed he knew more than a little about handling a razor for such a purpose. Whipping his arm up and across, the Negro aimed a slash designed to

lay Wes' face wide open. Throwing himself backwards as fast as he could, the Texan avoided injury. Not by much, he felt the wind of the blade's passing. Having missed his first blow, Sam brought his hand downwards in a roundhouse swing. Once again only Wes' speed and agility saved him from serious trouble.

'Get clear of him, Wes!' yelled Flip, reaching for his Colt.

Around swung Sam's hand once more as he followed up his prospective victim. High-heeled cowhand boots might be ideal for holding firm in stirrup irons, or spiking into the ground when roping a-foot, but they did not make for easy movement on the uneven, wheel-rutted surface of Bonham's main street. As Wes retreated to avoid the next attack, his boots struck an irregularity of the street's surface. He stumbled, saw the razor licking towards him and thought it had missed. Then he felt a burning sensation across the top of his left shoulder. A slit appeared in his shirt, reddening as blood flowed through from the gashed flesh underneath.

Staggering back, Wes collided with the hitching rail and hung there. Face twisted in hideous rage, Sam came at the Texan and drew back his arm for a further cut. Flip held his gun but dare not shoot for fear of hitting his friend. Back to the rail, Wes knew that he could not avoid the next attack. There was something frightening about an open razor, its very appearance carrying a menace far beyond that of any knife. However, Wes did not allow the thought to scare him immobile. Salvation hung close to his hand, in the shape of

the gunbelt he had taken off when starting what he believed to be no more than a piece of fun.

Once the thought came, Wes acted at his best speed. Out shot his right hand, fingers wrapping around the familiar wooden grips of the off side Army Colt and sliding it from leather. There would be time for only one shot and he did not dare take chances. While drawing the Colt, even without the need for conscious direction, he thumbed back the hammer and his forefinger entered the trigger guard. From waist high, aiming by instinctive alignment, he pressed back the trigger and released the hammer.

The Colt crashed even as Sam completed drawing back the razor for a savage slash that would lay his victim's throat open to the bone. Shooting to kill, Wes drove a conical .44 bullet between the Negro's glaring eyes. The impact stopped Sam in his tracks, then sent him backwards. Stained with Wes' blood, the razor slid from Sam's hand, then his body measured its length on the street.

Slowly Wes lowered the smoking Colt, his face pale under its tan as he looked at the first man he had ever killed. Everything had happened so quickly that nobody in the crowd had found time to make a move at halting the affair. Silence fell on the assembled people. None of them, with the possible exception of Cleek, could blame Wes for acting as he did. Yet all knew that the State Police would try to call the shooting murder.

'What the hell else could I have done?' Wes asked, returning his Colt to its holster.

‘Not a thing,’ Flip answered. ‘You’d best go see the doctor and get that cut fixed, then we’ll burn dust out of here.’

‘Why ride out?’ demanded Wes, ‘What I did was self-defense.’

‘That’s not what the law’ll say,’ Flip warned.

‘Damn it, Flip, Sheriff Waggets is a fair jasper. He’ll know I was forced to shoot. That Negro aimed to slit my throat.’

‘Say now, there’s a thought!’ Flip growled and swung towards Cleek. ‘What’s in that damned stuff you peddle, *hombre?*’

‘Huh?’

‘What’s in it, whiskey or loco weed, to make him act that mean?’

‘I don’t know what you mean!’ Cleek yelped, starting to turn away.

‘The hell you don’t!’ Flip spat out. ‘Just getting throwed a couple of times hadn’t ought to made him go hawg-wild like that.’

‘Leave him be, Flip!’ ordered Wes, feeling at his shoulder then looking at the blood on his palm. ‘Let’s go tell Bill Waggets what happened and ask him what I should do.’

‘I’ll tell you what you should do!’ Flip stated. ‘You should get that arm fixed, then ride like a bat out of hell away from here. Hey though! That looks bad. Let’s go see Doc James first.’

Seeing the amount of blood on Wes’ shoulder, Flip put aside all thought of learning the cause of the Negro’s

almost insane rage. Yet he felt that he had given Wes the best possible advice.

Already the crowd showed signs of splitting up. The townsmen had no wish to be found at the scene of the shooting, when they might have to answer questions on the incident. Few wanted to lie, yet all knew the State Police would make life hard for any man who told the truth. So they took the safe course of leaving and disassociating themselves from the affair.

While a number of cowhands had been in town the previous night, none were present apart from Wes and Flip. Not having homes where the State Police could easily find them, and being loyal to others of their kind, they would have backed up Wes' story had any of them been on hand. In a way Wes felt relieved that no cowhands were in the crowd. He regretted having had to kill the Negro, but did not wish to involve his friends in his problems. Also he felt that he could rely upon Sheriff Waggets to see justice done without the need of backing from anybody.

'What about him?' Flip inquired, pointing to the body and looking a mite pallid at the gills. He had never seen a man killed at so close a distance before.

'We'd best cover him with something and leave him lie until the sheriff's seen him,' Wes replied. 'Go into the Pronghorn and ask them for a pool table cover or something.'

'How about your shoulder?'

'It'll still be stuck on when you're through.'

Watching Flip enter the saloon and Wes awkwardly buckle on the gunbelt. Cleek scowled. However, he stood back, said nothing and waited until Flip returned carrying the cover from the pool table.

‘Let me do that,’ Cleek offered, stepping forward. ‘You get your pard to see a doctor.’

Knowing the zealous way—over-zealous it sometimes struck the visiting cowhands—in which Waggets handled his work, Wes felt surprised that the sheriff had not made an appearance. He concluded that Waggets could not be at the small building which housed the sheriff’s office and jail, or within hearing distance. So he decided to visit the local doctor, have his wound treated and then see the sheriff.

‘Reckon we can trust that jasper?’ Flip asked as he walked away with Wes, glancing back to where Cleek knelt at the side of the body and covered it with the sheet.

‘Bill Waggets’ll talk to him,’ Wes replied. ‘And everything’s there to show what happened.’

Kneeling at his grisly work, Cleek muttered curses under his breath as the cowhands walked away. The anger which filled him stemmed more from the loss of a useful business asset than out of the death of a friend. At best he and Sam had only tolerated each other. Friendship never existed between them; the Negro hated all white men and Cleek, despite being a Northerner, regarded colored people as his inferiors. They travelled together solely for the purpose of making a living without working over-hard for it. While Cleek sold his colored, vile-tasting liquid to the white

audiences, Sam bilked the Negroes. All in all they made a good living. Also travelling on terms of apparent equality with a Negro proved a good way of satisfying carpetbagging local officials of his sterling liberal qualities.

Flip's questions had caused Cleek some concern, for they came close to the truth. Whiskey had caused the Negro's explosive temper to flare up, but it did not come from the Voodoo Tonic. However, folks might remember the remarks made about the Tonic being responsible for Sam's rage. Knowing how fast news could travel over the range country, Cleek had no wish for Flip's statement to be made in public. It could easily ruin his business.

Somehow the cowhand must be prevented from talking. Yet if he went on to a witness stand to testify, he would most likely raise the matter of the Tonic again. The obvious answer was to make sure the affair never went to trial. At which point Cleek discounted Waggets from his thoughts. Despite being appointed by the Davis Administration, Bill Waggets performed his duty in a fair and impartial manner. Such a man would not suit Cleek's purpose.

Under the pretence of making a final adjustment to the cover, Cleek picked up Sam's razor. Darting a glance around to make sure nobody saw him, he folded the blade into its hilt and slipped it into his pocket then he rose and walked off in the direction of the Negro section of town.

Two - A Clear-Cut Case of Murder

At the doctor's office Wes learned that the gash in his shoulder although fairly deep, would not prove dangerous. Finding that the blood had already begun to congeal, the doctor decided against applying stitches. He bandaged the injured area with deft skill, warned Wes to avoid as far as possible any strenuous activity, took his fee and watched the two cowhands leave the room.

'Damned hot-headed young fool!' he growled. 'Not that I blame him for what he did. It was him or the other feller.'

Standing on the street once more, Flip resumed his attempts to persuade Wes to leave town. However, they saw the sheriff's horse standing at the hitching rail of the jail and Wes declined to go until he had spoken to Waggets. Like all cowhands, he and Flip never walked if they could ride. So they collected their waiting horses, swung into the saddles and rode along the street.

Entering the sheriff's office, they found him seated at his desk. A stocky, heavily moustached man in his late thirties. Waggets wore range clothes of plain and not expensive style. Working under the disadvantage of being appointed by Governor Davis, he had gained his county's at first grudging admiration and finally complete support.

'Howdy, young Hardin,' he greeted, without rising. 'I figured that you'd be coming in.'

'You've heard what happened?' asked Wes.

'I heard some,' Waggets admitted in a noncommittal tone.

'What else could Wes've done?' demanded Flip hotly.

'There's some's'd say he should've stayed clear of that kind of fuss in the first place,' Waggets said dryly. 'Only I never yet saw a cowhand who had sense enough to pound sand into a rat-hole.'

'Shucks, sheriff, I thought it was all in fun,' Wes protested. 'And the ten simoleons sure jingled pleasant to the ears.'

'Likely. Maybe you'd best tell me all about it. I only heard that you⁹d got into fuss with a Negro, he pulled a razor on you and you shot him.'

'Have you seen the Negro?' asked Flip before Wes could comply with the sheriff's request for information. 'We left him where he fell so's you could.'

'I've not long rid into town,' Waggets admitted. 'Maybe we'd best all go along and see the body. You can tell me what happened on the way.'

Before any of them could make a move to carry out the sheriff's suggestion, the front door opened to admit a white man and a Negro. Both wore dark blue 'Jeff Davis' campaign hats, although without following the Army fashion of looping one side—right for officers and cavalrymen, left for infantry—of the brim up and lacking the bugle badge on the front of the crown.

They dressed well. The white man wore a broadcloth coat, frilly-fronted shirt, fancy vest, breeches tucked into shining riding boots. Around his waist hung a well-designed gunbelt

and a Navy Colt rode in contoured holster at his right side. Big, heavily built, with a coarse, whiskey-reddened face, he managed to make his clothes look cheap and flashy. Nor did the Negro look much better, being clad in a check suit, salmon pink striped shirt and town shoes. He carried a Winchester carbine on the crook of his left arm.

Prominently displayed on each man's right jacket lapel was a large tinny-looking silver shield, with the words 'STATE POLICE' on top, a five pointed star in the center above 'TEXAS' and a number.

Halting at the door while his fellow officer advanced on the sheriff's desk, the Negro leaned against its jamb. Still cradling the carbine, he began to pick his teeth with savage concentration.

'See you got him, sheriff,' greeted the white man in a harsh New England accent. 'Good. That saves us the trouble of going hunting for him.'

'How's that?' Waggets asked mildly.

'So's we can do our job.'

'What job's that, Spargo?'

'We got word that the tall feller there killed a ... one of our black brothers. So we aim to take him to Fort Andrew to stand fair and legal trial for doing it. That's our job, sheriff.'

Hearing the words, Wes and Flip exchanged glances while their hands moved closer to the holstered Colts. Waggets twisted in his chair, growling a warning to the cowhands.

‘Easy there, both of you,’ he said and felt relieved when they made no attempt to draw the weapons.

For all that Waggets felt disturbed at the turn of events. Already something of Adam Spargo’s reputation had filtered into Bonham. Sufficient for the sheriff to wonder if Wes would stay alive long enough to reach Fort Andrew and stand his trial. Too many prisoners had been shot down ‘resisting arrest’, or killed ‘trying to escape’ since the State Police came into being. The Spargo brothers, two of them, figured frequently in accounts of such incidents.

In addition to recalling the solemn oath taken on assuming office, Waggets remembered that Wes Hardin possessed influential kinfolks. Men with important friends in Washington and fully capable of causing a thorough investigation into how the youngster came to die. Waggets knew that in the event of such an inquiry all the blame would be conveniently shuffled into his lap. To give him credit, the latter considerations worried the sheriff far less than the knowledge that agreeing to Spargo’s demands would probably condemn Wes to death.

‘You know what happened?’ Waggets inquired, still sounding mild. A danger sign easily recognized by anybody who knew him.

While Spargo knew something of the sheriff, he gathered his information at second hand and it did not include that important point. So he waved a hand in Wes’ direction.

‘He killed a man.’

‘Who was fixing to use a razor on him and not to give him a shave. There’s no call to waste time by taking him to Fort Andrew, we’ll tend to it here.’

‘You saying it was self-defense?’

‘What else is it when a feller comes at you with an open razor in his fist?’ demanded Flip, ignoring the sheriff’s cold stare.

‘There was no razor any place on or near the body,’ Spargo announced.

‘No raz—!’ Wes began.

‘That’s a 1—!’ yelled Flip at the same moment.

‘Choke off, both of you!’ interrupted the sheriff, cutting in on their angry protests. ‘You looked around, Spargo?’

‘I looked real good,’ the man agreed. ‘Nary a sign of any razor. Just a dead Negro and no witnesses to say how it happened.’

‘I can tell you h—’ Flip started.

‘That lippy kid’s starting to stick in my craw, Waggets,’ Spargo warned.

‘It’s my winning ways that does it,’ Flip answered.

‘If you don’t shut up, I’ll toss you in the pokey and lose the key!’ Waggets snapped at the youngster. ‘If there was no razor how did young Hardin get his shoulder cut open?’

Something in Wes’ eyes warned Spargo not to make the obvious suggestion that the wound be self-inflicted. Contrary to his statement, Spargo had questioned one witness. The fact that he learned that the affair was far from a clear-cut case of murder did not interest him. A

natural bully, he enjoyed being in a position to abuse and ill-use people. That reason, rather than any interest in seeing justice done, had brought him to the sheriff's office. One thing he did know; the cowhand, according to the witness, could handle a gun well enough to be dangerous. Spargo did not believe in taking chances.

'I dunno,' he replied. 'It could've been done a whole heap of ways. The feller who told us about the killing didn't say nothing about no razor.'

'Then why'd you know to look for one?' Wes asked.

'I looked at the body,' Spargo answered after a brief pause 'Any peace officer'd do that.'

While accepting the excuse, Waggets felt that it might have been more reasonable if Spargo had not needed to think of it before speaking.

'Who did tell you about it?' the sheriff inquired.

'Gent called Cleek.'

'*Gent!*' Flip spat out. 'He's the bastard who started the whole fuss. I just knowed he was a lying, four-flushing Yankee snake from the first time I saw him.'

'You're not helping *anybody*,' Waggets growled, heavily emphasizing the last word as he turned cold eyes to the young cowhand.

They were all alike, the young men who worked in Texas' major—and at that time almost only—industry. Loyal to their friends, they spoke without thinking of the consequences. To most cowhands, a peace officer represented trouble, restrictions to their fun when in town. While the sheriff

understood Flip's attitude, and could sympathize with it most times, he knew the youngster's interruptions and comments did nothing to improve the situation.

'Why not get him out of here then?' demanded Spargo.

'Because he was on hand and saw what happened,' Waggets replied. 'You say there're no other witnesses.'

'Nary a one that I could see.'

'Then it's just that Cleek jasper's word against Flip's.'

Wes landed a kick across Flip's shin just in time to end another outburst. Realizing that the sheriff was trying to straighten out a difficult affair, he did not want his impetuous young *amigo* to spoil things.

'Just one against one,' admitted Spargo, knowing whose word would be taken in any but a purely local investigation or trial.

'Then I'm keeping Wes here until I've had time to ask around and learn what did happen,' the sheriff stated.

'That's your word on it?' asked Spargo.

'That's the way I see it as county sheriff.'

'General Smethurst's not going to like this,' warned the State Policeman. 'He says you local John Laws should ought to back us fellers all you can.'

'Which same I'm doing,' Waggets answered, not sounding over impressed by the name of the local military commander. 'I'm offering to investigate this whole business and likely saving you making a long ride for nothing.'

Unintentionally Waggets' mention of the saving of a long ride struck at a sore spot for Spargo. Ridicule had become a

major weapon among the people fighting to free themselves from the hated yoke of the State Police. Recently an article of that nature had appeared in the *Texas State Gazette*, one which Spargo, among others, would never forget. While the comments about the State Police officers' armament and appearances had been infuriating, the latter part of the article proved even more so. Spargo could remember it almost word for word.

'And they were of the cavalry-breed, mounted outside the ribs of sway-backed, double-barreled mustangs of an exceedingly fine stock—so fine that they did hardly cast a shadow; whose hip-bones did protrude mightily, whereon these valiant warriors were wont to hang their massive felt helmets when they sought their pillows at night—'

In Texas, where a horse offered not only a means of transport but was almost a way of life, such words could be relied upon to strike home. Certainly many of the State Police, particularly the Negroes and white men from east of the Mississippi could not compete with the native Texans in matters equestrian. Even Spargo, who had served in a Union cavalry regiment during the War, felt conscious that the average boy in Texas could out-ride him and knew more about the care or management of horses. Since the article had appeared, to be quoted, discussed and repeated many times, much derision had been heaped upon every member of the State Police's head. So the sheriff's innocent words increased the rage Spargo already felt at not receiving blind, unquestioning compliance to his demands.

'You ain't doubting my word about there not being a razor?' he snarled.

'Nope,' the sheriff replied. 'I reckon it wasn't there when you looked. Only I've knowed Wes here for a fair spell now —'

'And you likely know that he's kin to Ole Devil Hardin,' Spargo interrupted.

'I know that,' admitted the sheriff in a low voice. 'So what?'

'Hardin's getting mighty well known in Texas—'

'Uncle Devil was mighty well known long before you swam the Big Muddy, *hombre*,' Wes put in.

'And he made you Yankees sing real low in Arkansas,' Flip went on.

Once again the sheriff could have cursed. No ex-member of the U.S. Army cared to remember, or be reminded, that during the War Ole Devil Hardin, commanding general of the Confederate Army of Arkansas, had held up superior Yankee forces and continued the chain of Southern victories which signified the beginning of the conflict. Tacticians and historians claimed that Ole Devil's command in Arkansas had enabled the South to hold on for at least another nine months before being forced to stop fighting; also that if the Confederate Government could have supplied him with more men and material, he might have altered the entire course of the war.

Cold anger glared in Spargo's eyes and he opened his mouth. Before he could say anything that might precipitate

real trouble, Waggets spoke. 'What're you getting at, Spargo?'

'Like I said. Hardin's getting some influence in Texas again, Maybe you—'

'If you're fixing to say what I figure,' Waggets cut in. 'Don't say it.'

'Yeah'? Spargo snarled. 'Well you—'

'Get the hell out of here, Spargo, while you can still walk!' Waggets barked.

For a moment the two men's eyes locked. Although the sheriff did not offer to rise from behind the desk or make any hostile moves, Spargo looked away first. Fury filled him, but he held it in check. Maybe the affair would have ended there. At least Spargo swung on his heel and stalked towards the door. Then he saw the mocking grin on the Negro's face and knew the story of his actions would be relayed to the other members of the State Police.

'All right, Wally,' Spargo said to the Negro, halting with his left side facing the men at the desk. 'We'll let the sheriff here handle it. It'll be for the adjutant general, or maybe the Governor, to say who's right or wrong.'

While speaking, he curled his fingers about the butt of the Navy Colt.

In later years Wes Hardin would have been suspicious of the man's actions and would have read a dangerous significance in the way he turned his gun-hung side out of sight. On that day, still young and with no desire to become

known as one of the top-guns, Wes never even suspected what Spargo planned.

Nor did Waggets for that matter. While their conversation had been acrimonious, he never thought that another peace officer would take it along the lines Spargo contemplated. At the worst Waggets expected a complaint to be lodged with the adjutant general, but doubted if much would come of that. The Davis administration had enough on their plates without adding to their troubles and were unlikely to replace a sheriff whom they could point out as being one of *their* appointees *and* popular in his county.

Slipping his gun from its holster, Spargo swung in an almost leisurely manner to face the desk. Shock and disbelief creased the sheriff's face as he saw the Colt slanting in his direction. Already the hammer had clicked back under Spargo's thumb. Even as the sheriff started to thrust back his chair and rise, hand fanning to the gun on his hip, lead drove into his chest. Jerking back, he overturned the chair and sprawled over it to the floor.

Spargo cocked his gun at the height of its recoil. Although fury at his treatment had caused him to start shooting, a deeper reason lay behind his actions. Belonging to the State Police had not proved the rainbow's end pot-of-gold promised on enlistment. Only the senior members of the organization gathered the real rich pickings. Already Spargo had tired of helping to drive some rancher off, then seeing the property pass into the hands of a more

influential member of the administration. He wanted more of the spoils.

A county sheriff received a regular salary, percentages on fines imposed upon minor offenders and numerous other side benefits not open to a member of the State Police. Waggets' fair-minded handling of the Fannin County law did not suit a number of important people. Most likely they would reward the man who removed him from office. Especially if the removing be done in a manner likely to cause embarrassment to Ole Devil Hardin. If the story could be spread that one of Ole Devil's kin had killed the sheriff, the Davis administration would be given valuable ammunition to use against him.

So Spargo intended to cut down both the cowhands, blaming them for the sheriff's murder. If he also killed his companion, the flames would be heaped even higher. With that thought in mind, Spargo started to swing his gun towards Wes.

Sensing the danger, even though mentally staggered by the enormity of Spargo's actions, Wes' subconscious thoughts directed his movements. Like a flash his right hand flew across to and drew the left side Colt. Practice and his superb muscular co-ordination enabled him to produce and fire a gun with almost blinding speed.

To Spargo's amazement, the long-barreled Army colt came from Wes' holster and pointed at him before his own weapon completed its turn towards the new target. So fast did it happen that the rasp of steel drawing over leather

merged in with the sudden crash of exploding black powder. Wes' bullet ripped into Spargo's throat, slamming him into the wall. Still on his feet, spouting blood from the severed jugular vein, the stricken man tried to realign his gun.

Any trained gunfighter or peace officer would have shot again, continuing to throw lead into Spargo until he fell or dropped the Colt. Wes just stood and stared, sick at the thought that he had once more been compelled to put lead into another human being.

It might have gone badly for Wes but, before he could point the Colt, Spargo's hand sagged. Slowly, as if the effort proved too great, Spargo started to slip down the wall. His fingers opened and the thumb released the drawn-back hammer. As the Colt fell, it crashed and buried a bullet into the floor. Then Spargo crumpled over and collapsed.

On the heels of Wes' shot, Flip jerked out his Colt. Seeing Spargo's action, the lackadaisical pose left the Negro. All too well he realized the position his companion's treacherous attack placed him in. No coward, the Negro was also no fool and did not aim to tangle against odds of two to one. More so when half of the opposition, had already displayed such extreme competence when handling a gun.

Jerking open the door, the Negro dived through it and raced off towards the comparative safety of his own part of town. He and two more colored State Police officers had been acting as unwilling hosts to Spargo when Cleek

brought word of the shooting. Yet he doubted if the three of them could arrest that tall cowhand. However, reinforcements were sufficiently close to hand for the Negro to feel certain that justice—State Police fashion—would soon be done.

Three - Go North With A Trail Drive

Everything happened so swiftly that Flip failed to keep up with the riptide pace of the events. While he drew his gun, it had been no more than an automatic gesture. Often he had wondered how he might react in such a situation. Tangled at last in the middle of a corpse-and-gunsmoke affair, he found himself unable to shoot at another human being. Before the youngster could make any move, the Negro darted out of the office.

'I'll fetch him back here!' Flip offered, the departure jolting him out of his numbed state of mind.

'Let him go,' Wes replied, holstering his smoking Colt.

'But he'll—' Flip began, pausing as he started to move forward.

'Leave him go *amigo*,' Wes repeated, knowing that pursuit might end in further shooting and wanting to avoid more bloodshed.

A low groan of pain drew both cowhands' attention to Waggets. What they saw took all thoughts of the Negro from their minds. Blood reddened the sheriff's right hand as he held it pressed against his chest. Despite this he tried to rise. Pain twisted at his face, causing him to sink down as Wes and Flip sprang in his direction.

'S-Spargo?' Waggets gasped.

‘Cashed, I reckon,’ Wes replied, suddenly realizing that he had not troubled to make sure his enemy could no longer harm him. He looked across the room as he knelt at the sheriff’s side and went on. ‘I cut loose, hit him in the neck. He’s down, lying still and not holding his gun.’

‘He’s likely done then,’ the sheriff breathed.

‘Reckon you can stand it if Flip and me carry you into a cell? Then we’ll go fetch Doc James to look to you.’

‘W-Where’s the Negro?’ Waggets demanded, ignoring the question.

‘He took a greaser stand-off,’ Flip replied. ‘Lit out of here going like a Nueces steer.’

Many Texans believed that any Mexican finding himself in a tight corner would take a ‘greaser stand-off’, run away from it if possible. Steers from down Nueces way bore a reputation for being remarkably fleet of foot. However the sheriff paid no attention to the literal meaning of Flip’s answer, being more concerned with how the Negro’s departure would affect Wes.

‘Then you leave me lie here, young Hardin,’ he gritted. ‘There’ll be folks around fast enough to see me right. That Negro’ll’ve gone for help. You’d best get the hell away from here afore he finds it.’

‘Why should I run?’ Wes demanded. ‘That bastard gunned you and likely aimed to drop Flip ‘n’ me next.’

‘Which won’t matter a whoop-and-a-holler to the State Police when they get here,’ the sheriff warned. ‘They’ll shoot you down first and then start in to asking what

happened. So you get out of here *pronto* and I'll see that folks get to know the truth.'

'But—'

'You do it, Wes!' urged Flip, having a typical cowhand mistrust of most types of peace officers. 'I'll stay on with the sheriff and make sure he's all right. It'll be you they want.'

True enough—up to a point. Yet Wes doubted if the State Police would regard Flip as no more than an innocent bystander. Before he could state his objections to leaving, or demand that if he went his *amigo* came along, the sheriff slowly rose up on one elbow and glared at him. Already feet thudded on the sidewalk and startled faces peered through the windows.

'Go to it, damn you!' Waggets gritted. 'If you haven't enough good sense to worry about yourself, think about your Uncle Devil.'

'How's that?' Wes asked, puzzled by this further reference to Ole Devil Hardin.

If the point arose, Wes could only remember meeting his illustrious uncle on three occasions. He thought back to the meetings, recalling to mind a tall, ramrod straight man with a lean fighting soldier's face and commanding voice. In those days Ole Devil had been a power in the State, rich, important, one of Texas' leading figures. On his return from the war, he had taken a toss riding a bad horse¹ and had been tied to a wheelchair ever since. Sure he had his almost legendary floating outfit to act as extensions of his will, but he had never used them to oppose the Davis administration.

So Wes failed to see how his uncle might be affected by this fuss with the State Police. It would be different if Cousins Dusty and Red, Mark Counter or the Ysabel Kid were involved.

'I always reckoned cowhands never thought beyond booze, gals and food, but I figured *you'd* know the time of day, young Hardin!' Waggets growled. 'Ole Devil's doing all he can to get rid of this carpetbagger scum who're running the State. So don't you make his work any harder.'

'I've never reckoned much on taking a greaser stand-off,' Wes answered.

'You've never been in a tight corner like this afore, either,' Waggets pointed out. 'Don't take my word for it. At least go out and ask your pappy what he reckon's best for you to do.'

'But—But—'

'Take my advice, boy!' Waggets ordered as the door opened and men entered. 'Likely it'll be the same as your paw gives you. Light out. Go north with a trail drive. Do anything that'll keep you out of Texas for a spell.'

Looking at the sheriff's pain-wracked face, Wes realized that every word came straight from the heart. A peace officer of Waggets' type would never advise flight unless he felt certain that any other course could prove disastrous. So Wes decided to do as the sheriff suggested; at least he would go as far as heading for home and asking his father's opinion.

'You know best, sheriff,' he said and started to rise.

'I reckon I do, boy,' breathed Waggets. 'And don't look so all-fired worried. It won't be forever. As soon as Ole Devil and his pards can force Congress to give us Texans back the right to vote, you'll soon see Davis and his whole stinking pack run out of office. Then—and not before then—it'll be safe for you to come back here.'

'What happened, Bill?' demanded one of the men who entered.

'Spargo there shot me, tried to gun Wes who stopped him,' Waggets replied.

'Spargo—' repeated the man, owner of the town's most prosperous store. Then shock twisted his features. 'You mean Spargo of the State Police?'

'Sure,' agreed the sheriff flatly.

Immediately the questions all the newcomers wished to ask were, forgotten, just as Waggets had figured they would be. None of the crowd wanted to become too closely involved in an affair of that nature.

'Get going, Wes,' Waggets ordered, having achieved his aim.

At that moment Doctor James' lean angular frame appeared at the office door. He elbowed through the crowd with a complete disregard for social standing or civic position. Stopping for a moment, he looked at Spargo's body and knew it did not require his attention. Only for a brief instant did his eyes rest on the blood-smeared shield of office, then he continued his way to the sheriff's side.

‘All right!’ he growled, swinging round. ‘There’re too many people in here. Let’s have some of you leave.’

Given such an opportunity, every townsman present turned to go. Each of them regarded James’ demand as a heaven sent chance to leave without the stigma of turning his back on the sheriff. The situation ran parallel to when Wes shot the Negro, with nobody wishing to be in a position where they might have to give evidence contrary to the interests of the State Police.

‘Thanks, Doc,’ Waggets said weakly, watching the last of the townspeople leave. ‘Now—’

‘You lay there and stop talking!’ James ordered and darted a glance at the two cowhands who still stood close at hand.

‘Get riding, Wes!’ ordered the sheriff.

‘I could use somebody to do the fetching and carrying.’ James commented.

‘I’ll stay on,’ Flip promised. ‘Go to it, Wes. I’ll come out and tell you as soon as there’s any news.’

Slowly Wes turned and walked from the room. James hardly spared him a look, being already involved in a preliminary inspection of the sheriff’s wound. As Wes left the office, the gathered people fell back. Twice in a day he had been forced to shoot a man. Yet each time the killing had been justified in that doing so saved his own life. That aspect did not cause the crowd’s retreat. They feared what the State Police might do to any man who appeared to condone Wes’ actions.

Unhindered and unquestioned by the crowd, Wes collected his horse. The bay gelding had speed, looks and stamina. While it did not possess the qualities needed for a working cow-horse, it made a fine go-to-town mount. Unfastening the reins, he swung into the saddle and rode out of Bonham along the trail leading to his home.

‘The sheriff’s taking a hell of a chance letting him go,’ a man commented.

‘Yeah,’ another replied. ‘The State Police aren’t going to like what’s happened in there.’

‘Now me,’ a third put in. ‘I don’t know what’s happened—and sure as hell don’t want to.’

That being the general opinion, the people started to depart about their business. In the office, Flip watched Wes leave and the breaking up of the crowd. Then he turned and looked to where James was taking instruments from the black bag he brought along.

‘Wes’ gone and the folks aren’t sticking around,’ the youngster said.

‘I didn’t expect they would,’ James answered dryly. ‘Come here and lend a hand. This’s worse than I expected.’

~*~

About a mile out of Bonham, along the westbound stage trail, a wide, well-used track cut off through an area grown over by white oak, chestnut and flowering dogwood trees. Turning down the track, Wes soon entered a large clearing and looked at his home. Surrounded by a white picket fence and truck garden, the Hardin house was built from local

timber. A well-designed barn, a small cabin and a couple more wooden structures completed the property. All showed signs of care and attention, being neat and clean. In addition to his duties as parson, Wes' father repaired or made various kinds of leather equipment. He had built the house originally in the belief that the location would be selected as a site for the proposed town of Bonham. Even on learning that the other settlers preferred to build in more open country, Parson Hardin declined to change his home. However, the excellence of his work caused people to accept the slight inconvenience of coming out to the house when wishing to do business.

At first Wes felt puzzled at the lack of life around the place. While he expected his father to be indoors and working, he could see no sign of either of the family servants, an elderly Negro couple who refused to worry about such foolishness as 'freedom'. Nor did Bucky, the big black-and-tan hound, come bounding down the path to the fence gate, bawling out a bugle-voiced greeting.

Then Wes remembered. The incidents of the day had caused him to forget how his father had left on a visit the previous day. Combining business with pleasure, Parson Hardin had taken along his servants and the hound.

Opening the fence's gate, Wes led his bay to the barn. While off saddling and attending to the horse's needs, he wondered what he ought to do. He expected that his father would return that evening, so put off any thoughts of riding

after the old man. With the bay settled, he walked to the house and entered.

Restlessly Wes prowled the sitting room, unable to settle down or relax even in the familiar surroundings of his home. He wanted badly to talk with his father, to ask for advice and ensure that Parson Hardin knew the true facts of what had happened in town that afternoon. For a time he considered changing his mind and setting off in search of his father. However, by that time the horse would be well into its food and could not be ridden on a full stomach without the chance of injury. So he flung himself into the comfortable old rocking-chair before the fireplace and set it into motion.

No cowhand worth his salt ever spent his valuable leisure time in town sleeping, so Wes felt tired. Although he doubted if such a thing would be possible, he dozed off. Just how long he slept, he did not know for sure. On waking, he found night had fallen and the room was in darkness.

For a moment he sat in the rocking chair, trying to decide what had woken him. Then he realized it had been the sound of approaching hooves. Not his father, or he would have heard buggy wheels too. Rising, he crossed the room. In passing he drew one of his Colts from the gunbelt he had left on the sitting room table. At the window he looked out and saw two men leaving their horses fastened to the picket fence while they came through the gate. Recognizing Flip and Doctor James, he holstered the Colt and opened the front door.

‘Hey there,’ he greeted as they came up across the porch, ‘Anything wrong?’

The last came as he saw the expressions of the visitors’ faces.

‘We’ve got bad trouble, Wes,’ Flip replied

‘Let’s go inside and talk,’ James went on.

Leading the way into the sitting room, Wes lit the lamp and looked from one to the other of his guests.

‘What’s up?’ he demanded.

‘The sheriff died,’ Flip answered.

‘He was hit bad, real bad,’ Jamers continued. ‘I tried—’

‘Sure, Doc,’ Wes said quietly.

‘That’s not the worst of it,’ Flip put in before Wes could say more. ‘That Negro found a bunch of State Police. They’re in town right now, asking questions.’

‘That figures,’ Wes growled, too shocked by the news of the sheriff’s death to think much about his friend’s words.

‘It’s bad, boy,’ James said gently. ‘They’re making it clear that they’re fixing to blame you for killing Bill Waggets—’

‘You know that’s a damned lie, Doc!’ Wes shouted, jolted out of his shock.

‘I’ve Bill’s dying word for it,’ agreed the doctor. ‘Flip saw what happened and so did the Negro with Spargo. Only it don’t make one bit of difference; No carpetbagger judge and jury would listen to Flip, or me, and the Negro for sure’s not going to tell the truth.’

Always assuming that the case ever saw trial, it would follow the course James suggested. More likely Wes would

be killed on sight, as he, the doctor and Flip well knew.

So Wes felt the need for advice. Young, inexperienced in anything other than the handling of longhorn cattle or horses, he turned to the doctor in the absence of his father.

‘What’ll I do, Doc?’

‘Where’s your paw?’

‘Went over to Walt Caxton’s place yesterday, fixing to work, then hunt coon all night.’

‘Well, was I you, I’d get a’fork my hoss and fog over that way. Tell him all that happened and that you can rely on me to speak the truth when the time comes.’

‘And me!’ Flip affirmed grimly. ‘No stinking State Police skunk’ll make me lie about you, Wes.’

‘You’re going with him, boy!’ James growled. ‘They’ll blow your head off to stop you talking.’

‘A man could get killed having that happen,’ Flip said, trying to sound a whole heap more cheerful than he felt.

‘There’s one trouble,’ Wes remarked. ‘I’m not sure which way Pappy’ll come home. So I might miss him.’

‘Let me stick around here until he comes back, in case you do,’ Flip suggested. ‘I can tell him—’

‘No!’ Wes barked.

‘It’d be best,’ James answered. ‘You ride out, Wes. I’ll stay on here with Flip until your paw comes home. When Joel tells me what he figures’s best for you, I’ll send him after you.’

‘You stay put at the Caxton place until you hear from me,’ Flip finished.

'It'll be risky as all hell,' Wes warned grimly.

'Why sure,' admitted Flip. 'Only this's not the safest game we ever sat in, no matter what way you call it.'

Although Wes tried to argue against Flip's plan, the youngster proved adamant on it. So Wes gave up the attempt and made preparations for his departure. Swiftly he gathered such of his belongings as he might need during a protracted absence, packing his warbag and wrapping it in his bedroll. Aided by Flip, he saddled the bay and slid his Winchester rifle into the boot. With all ready, he mounted the horse and looked at his friend.

'Don't take fool chances, *amigo*,' he warned, extending his hand.

'You know me,' grinned Flip.

'That's why I'm telling you,' Wes replied and looked at James. 'See you sometime, Doc—and thanks.'

'Get going!' James answered gruffly. 'Get going, boy. Stay well clear of the town trail and you'll be all right.'

Casting a long look at his home, Wes turned the bay's head. Then he brought it to a halt.

'You don't reckon they'll be coming out here after me, do you?' he asked.

'Last I saw of them, they were at the Pronghorn letting the barkeeper buy drinks for them,' Flip replied.

'I heard they were waiting for somebody, or something,' James went on. 'For more help, maybe. Knowing their kind, I don't reckon they'll do much afore morning. Go on, get riding.'

Partially satisfied, Wes started the horse moving again. He rode down the path, out of the gate and swung off through the trees. Watching him go, James let out a low sigh of relief. Wes knew the country like the back of his hand, far better than did any of the State Police. Given a head start, he should be able to get clear of the area.

Not that James expected any immediate pursuit. The State Police did not possess a reputation for diligence in the performance of their duties. Probably they would spend the night drinking, at the saloonkeeper's expense, and not visit the Hardin place until morning.

'Let's get inside,' James told Flip. 'Say, do you play cribbage or checkers, boy?'

'Checkers,' grinned Flip. 'We used to play out at the spread. Used Winchester and Sharps bullets for men.'

'How'd you make kings?' grinned the doctor as they entered the house.

'Lay one over on its side. Trouble being that if anybody knocked the table you were like to wind up with all kings.'

Despite his carefree attitude, Flip proved to be a good checkers player and a worthy opponent even for a wily veteran like James. They became so engrossed in the game that neither paid any great attention to the time. Before either realized it, four hours had passed.

'Lord! Is that the time?' James growled, glancing at the wall clock. 'No sign of Joel yet.'

'Maybe Wes met him on the way,' Flip suggested. 'Reckon he'll mind if I brew a pot of Arbuckle's?'

‘Nope,’ the doctor answered. ‘And I could use a cup myself.’

Before Flip could carry out his intention of making a pot of coffee—at that time Arbuckle’s coffee was the most popular variety in the West—there came a dramatic interruption.

Something smashed against the window, shattering the glass and exploding into a ball of flames which fell into the room. Flip let out a startled yell and leapt to his feet. No less surprised, James flung his chair over and sprang from the tables while unsure of whether the house had been struck by lightning, or if some human agency had caused the fire, the doctor wasted no time in idle conjecture.

‘Grab something and try to douse it!’ he yelled.

With an awesome speed the fire spread, leaping at the dry walls and floor. Scooping up a bearskin rug from in front of the fireplace, Flip ran towards the blaze. James followed and stared at the conflagration. Sniffing the air, he caught a horribly familiar scent. Unless he missed his guess, the ball of fire which had tumbled into the room had been caused by igniting a mixture of benzole, crude petroleum, turpentine, coal oil and tar. The last time such a smell had come to his nostrils had been during the war, when under Yankee bombardment using the incendiary shells invented by Alfred Berney.

One thing the experience had taught James. No ordinary tactics would serve to douse a blaze caused by ‘Grecian-

fire', or 'liquid damnation' as the compound had been called. 'Leave it, boy!' he yelled. 'Get the hell out of here!'

Four - A Dose of 'Liquid Damnation'

The dozen men riding through the night in the direction of the Hardin house formed an average cross-section of State Police officers. Eight were Negroes, better dressed than most of their kind and armed with either Winchester or Sharps carbines and including in their number Spargo's companion, Wally. None rode good quality horses, which might account for why they trailed along behind their white companions. Bringing up the rear, one of the Negroes led a packhorse which bore a stoutly-made pannier on either flank and with what, at first glance, appeared to be a five foot length of sturdy metal pipe securely fastened along the center of its saddle.

Ahead of the others, aloof and clearly in command, came a big, swarthily-handsome man. He wore a Union Army officer's Burnside hat, without military decorations, an artillery captain's jacket that hung open to show a tartan shirt, civilian riding breeches and shining boots. Although his holster had an open top, its ivory-handled Navy Colt pointed butt forward in the Army manner. Best mounted of all the party, Jim 'Rocket' Robbins rode in silence and grew increasingly annoyed at the continuous rumble of whiskey-inspired conversation behind him.

None of the remaining trio of white men looked the kind a self-respecting peace officer would accept as members of a posse. In less favorable times their type could be found idling around any big town. Avaricious, shunning work, they would willingly go along with any kind of devilment—whether it be a ‘workers’ riot or a lynch mob—that offered the chance of free drinks and loot. Mostly from the North, they supported—for want of a better word—the Union without caring a damn about the issues and causes of the war. Davis’ administration hired many such as coming cheaper and having less scruples than more able men.

At last a guffaw of louder laughter caused Robbins to twist around in his saddle and glare at the others.

‘Shut that row down!’ he snarled. ‘Do you want him to hear and run out before we get there?’

Instantly the chatter and laughter died away; although not for entirely the reason Robbins mentioned. Nudging his horse forward, a tall, gangling white man, with a face scarred by a bayonet while robbing the bodies after a battle, ranged alongside his leader and spoke in a voice hardly louder than a whisper.

‘Way that Negro who was with Spargo tells it, that Hardin kid’s *real* good with a gun.’

‘So?’ grunted Robbins.

‘So when you call him to come out and surrender, he’s more likely to come shooting than with his hands up.’

‘I’d say that’s more than likely, Mr. Skench,’ Robbins said. ‘It all depends.’

‘What on?’ Skench asked.

‘On whether we call for him to come out and surrender,’ replied Robbins, looking back in the direction of the packhorse. ‘Or whether we let old Spitter there do it for us.’

Following the direction of his leader’s gaze, Skench frowned. Then the other’s meaning became clear, although he showed little relief at the understanding.

‘You aim to try that f—’ Skench began, then remembered how Robbins picked up his nickname. So he rapidly rephrased the question. ‘So that’s why you brought it along?’

‘You didn’t reckon I’d be stupid enough to ride up to the front of the house and ask him to come out, did you?’

‘Well, I hadn’t thought much on it,’ Skench admitted frankly.

‘I have!’ stated Robbins. ‘Even if I was that stupid, young Hardin’s too smart to come out. I’ve heard what Wally said. Spargo was good with a gun and had it in his hand. But that Hardin kid still managed to draw and shoot him. One thing I do know. I’m not taking chances with anybody *that* good.’

‘How do we play it then?’

‘We’ll leave the horses on the main trail and go down to the house on foot, real quietly. Then after we’ve got the place surrounded, I’ll slap one into it, give ’em a dose of “liquid damnation” and you boys can start shooting as soon as he comes out.’

Doctor James had guessed correctly when saying he thought the State Police might be waiting for somebody.

While Skench and the others felt they should avenge Spargo, they lacked the initiative to set about it. Left to their own devices, they would have spent the night drinking at the saloonkeeper's expense in Bonham. Then Robbins arrived and applied the driving force of his personality to spur the others into action. His motives stemmed less from a desire for revenge, or sense of duty, than due to his seeing a heaven-sent opportunity to carry out part of the mission which brought him to Texas.

On reaching the point where the track to the Hardin house left the main trail, Robbins ordered his men to dismount and fasten their horses to the trees. Nobody questioned his right to command. Even the Negroes, normally surly and truculent when given orders by a white man, obeyed him. Working with the leader of the packhorse, two Negroes unloaded each pannier while he unfastened and shouldered the metal tube. With other Negroes carrying their burdened companions' carbines, the party moved off along the path.

Ranging ahead of his companions, Robbins reached and studied the clearing. By the time the others arrived, he knew what he wanted doing and set about putting his plan into operation. Swiftly he deployed men to cover both sides and the rear of the building.

'Looks like that other cowhand's with him,' Skench remarked, nodding to the two horses still fastened to the picket fence.

‘So much the better,’ Robbins answered. ‘We don’t want witnesses around who can tell what really happened in the sheriff’s office. Get going.’

‘Reckon there’re any dogs on the place?’

‘I’ve not seen nor heard them if there are. Go to it. We haven’t all night and the longer we wait, the more chance of somebody hearing us.’

‘Sure,’ Skench replied sullenly and slouched away.

Left to himself, Robbins turned and looked at the Negroes who had carried the packhorse’s load.

‘We’ll set up right here, Eli,’ he said.

‘Sure thing, Massa Rocket.’

Clearly Eli knew his business. Telling the others to put down the panniers and go to their places, he swung the tube from his shoulder. After resting one end on the ground, he unloosened a screw and let down a set of bipod legs fitted about three inches from the other end. Spiking the legs firmly into the soil, he moved back and raised what looked like an enlarged rifle rear-sight on top of the tube. Behind the sight the upper half of the tube had been cut away to leave a trough possibly a foot in length, its inner surface blackened as if by fire.

With that done, Eli walked across to the panniers, opened one and reached inside. He lifted out a cylinder seventeen inches long and with a diameter of three and a quarter inches, rounded at one end, but tapered to a brief truncated cone at the other. Carrying the object to the tube,

he rested it on the trough and thrust the rounded end into the hole.

While Eli went about his work, Robbins stood studying the house. Licking a finger, the white man tested the wind for direction and gauged its velocity. Then he went to the panniers and lifted out a wooden box from which he took a piece of brass tube six inches long and no thicker than a man's little finger. Anybody who had knowledge of 'ground torpedoes'—landmines they would later be called—might have recognized the object as a friction tube used for exploding the devices at a distance. At one end of the tube was the firing mechanism, a spring-held metal bar with a rasp-like surface to be dragged over and ignite the percussion mixture beneath it. Once lit, the mixture fired a compound of mealed gunpowder and spirit that in turn set off the main charge of the 'torpedo'.

Sliding the tube into the vent at the base of the cylinder, Robbins clipped a lanyard from the box on to the eyelet of the friction bar. With that done, he paused and looked in a satisfied manner at the device on which he based his hopes for a prosperous future.

During the latter stages of the war, a British Army officer, Major Lion, arrived in the United States with an improved version of a very ancient weapon. Rockets had been used in battle by the Chinese long before the birth of Christ and received sporadic revivals through the ages. Already the Federal forces made use of the Congreve and Hale rockets, with varying success and favoring the latter. Known as the

Hale Spin-Stabilized Rocket, it improved upon its predecessors by doing away with the troublesome guidance stick. Instead it relied upon a set of three metal vanes inserted behind the exhaust nozzle. These acted on the propellant gasses and, in theory, kept the rocket flying in the right direction.

While the Hale proved more successful, less inaccurate or dangerous than the stick-stabilized Congreve rocket, it possessed some of the other's vices. However, Major Lion believed that his launcher answered the problem of ensuring that the missile started its flight in the required direction. He backed his beliefs to the extent of forming a rocket battery, of which Robbins became an early member and convert. Unfortunately the rockets did not show up any too well in field trials and so the battery received instead conventional six-pounder cannon.

Many of the battery's members, particularly Robbins, regretted the decision and wished that they could have retained their original armament. After much study, thought and experimentation, Robbins concluded that Lion should have concentrated their efforts on the rockets' incendiary role, leaving the shell and solid head to the more suitable cannon. However, improvements in artillery, along with the waning of the South's ability to continue the fight, caused a lack of official support for making and perfecting the rockets. Then the war ended and prevented him from having an opportunity to prove his theories.

Mexico, torn apart by the struggle to free itself from foreign rule, seemed a likely field. However, the French under Maximillian showed no interest in rockets and the Mexicans, led by Juarez, might have used them but could not be trusted to pay for the privilege.

Next Robbins offered his services to the police departments of various Eastern cities. Despite a post-war increase in crime, all declined to hire an expensive expert on the odd chance that they might one day require his specialized ability to dislodge a criminal barricaded in a building.

Unable to find employment in his own field, Robbins learned of the Texas State Police. Deciding they might be more amenable, he applied for enrolment. He possessed all the qualifications required by the adjutant general; the right kind of background, few scruples, sufficient money to purchase his horse, harness, badge and firearms—all supplied at something above their true value by contractors allegedly related to that important State official. So he found ready acceptance. Natural leaders came few and far between, especially men like Robbins who showed little concern with scooping up a major portion of any loot gathered. So he received the rank of captain. Although he brought along his rockets and a launcher, until that night the chance to use them had been denied him.

With the primer fixed, Robbins stepped behind the tube and looked at the house in a calculating manner. First he changed the height of the legs in a downwards direction,

then adjusted the back sight's eyepiece by moving it up the graduations marked on the bar.

Satisfied that he could not improve the launcher's aim, he glanced impatiently around him. If his efforts ended in success, he would make certain that General Smethurst received all the details. Mention in a favorable report to Washington might result in a revised interest in rockets. In addition to being lighter and more easily transported than any cannon, the launcher cost much less to build, always an important factor when considering a new weapon in times of peace. Should the Army start using rockets again, Robbins hoped to be recalled and promoted to train soldiers in their use.

However, there was no point in his opening fire until the covering parties had taken their positions. No matter how good a shot he made, or how well the rocket worked, there would be little credit gained if young Hardin escaped.

'They's ready, Massa Rocket,' Eli announced, having seen a wave of the hand from one of the men covering the left side of the building from the picket fence.

'So am I!' Robbins breathed, taking the end of the lanyard.

Moving back the full length of the lanyard, he knelt down to the right side of the launcher. For a moment he paused, then gave the lanyard a sharp tug at a downwards angle. With a slight rasping sound, the bar snapped over the percussion compound and he heard the faint hiss of the compressed, spirit-soaked powder igniting. Next came the

louder sound as the rocket's propellant charge took fire. Slowly at first the rocket slid farther into the launcher tube. Its pace increased as the slow-burning compound of niter, charcoal and sulfur, rammed firmly into the case by a powerful press, burned into the gas which thrust it forward. With a savage hiss it burst out of the muzzle, curving a shooting-star trail through the air in the direction of the house.

Hardly daring to breath, Robbins watched the rocket's flight. For once it went true, with none of the uncertain, unnerving wavering some of its kind developed, due to fissuring of the case during packing causing an irregular burning of the propellant. He ignored the sight of the horses at the fence rearing in fright as the rocket passed its awesome way over their heads, but could hardly hold down a yell of triumph when he saw it strike home. While he would have been satisfied with a hit anywhere on the building, he never expected to make such a spectacularly lucky shot.

An early failing of the Hale rocket had been the uncertainty of its warhead's operation. While the heat of the propellant eventually burned through to and ignited the 'liquid damnation', the process took time. At shorter ranges, if the casing failed to rupture on impact there was always a chance that the ignition would be delayed long enough to give the enemy a chance to douse the propellant with water. To prevent that, Robbins had fitted a percussion cap and small amount of black powder in the nose. On striking

the target, the blow fired the cap, detonated the powder and the resulting explosion set off the fire-raising charge.

Watching the rocket reach its mark, Robbins saw his theories justified by results. Striking the window, it shattered the glass and burst into flames as it tumbled through.

‘It won’t be long before they come out!’ he breathed, watching the red glow in the house. ‘By God! If this drunken scum let him escape now, I’ll—’

He held down his comment on what he meant to do if his companions failed to shoot Wes Hardin and the other cowhand, watching the result of his work. Already in his mind he had started to compose a report of his success for presentation to the military commander of the area. Although willing to admit to himself that luck had taken the rocket into the window he did not intend to make that aspect public knowledge. Rather he would claim that he sighted with the intention of placing his missile in such an advantageous manner. Knowing the working of the senior military mind, he believed the claim would find a more ready acceptance if it came backed with the news that the rocket had made possible the killing of a wanted man.

‘We sure give ‘em their dose of “liquid damnation”, boss,’ enthused Eli, staring at the rapidly growing flames. ‘Just look at that place burn!’

Not that Robbins needed any encouragement. An almost fanatical glare shone in his eyes as he watched the speed with which the fire built up inside the house. When all went

well and the warhead's contents did not ignite prematurely, or fail to take fire at all, an incendiary rocket could be relied upon to stir up a considerable blaze.

While such other members of the posse as could see the result of the rocket shot enjoyed its spectacular effect, there was one disadvantage. The flames rose so quickly that the glare of them prevented any chance of seeing what went on in the front of the room.

Higher licked the fire, spreading and eating at the front wall, but nobody came out through the front door. Standing with tightly clenched fists, Robbins strained his ears to catch the sound of shooting from either the sides or rear of the building. 'Looks like he wasn't i—' Eli began.

Then the front door flew open and two men burst out, leaping across the porch. Disappointment hit at Robbins as he saw the first man to be middle-aged and dressed in a town suit. While the other most certainly was the second cowhand, the first man could not be Wes Hardin. Even as the thought struck Robbins, guns roared along the picket fence as every man who could do so opened fire on the pair.

Caught by bullets from a Winchester rifle and Sharps carbine, Doctor James buckled over and crashed to the ground. Unable to stop himself, Flip bounded a couple of strides past the stricken man.

'Doc!' he yelled, skidding to a halt and starting to turn.

A moment later lead ripped into the center of the youngster's back and tumbled him across James' body.

‘Hold that shooting!’ Robbins bellowed. ‘That wasn’t Hardin.’

‘Well, if he’s inside, Massa Rocket, he’ll soon be coming out,’ Eli commented. ‘That’s for certain sure.’

Once started the fire spread fast and ate its way through the Hardin house with ever-increasing fury. A crackle of exploding ammunition and the deeper boom of black powder igniting caused Robbins to tense and reach for his Colt. However, the front door still did not give up a third fleeing shape, so he concluded the fire must have set off bullets and a powder horn.

‘It looks like young Hardin’s not in there,’ he admitted reluctantly as the entire roof burst into flames.

‘It sure ‘nough do,’ Eli agreed. Then a thought struck him and set his eyes to rolling nervously at the dark woods around the clearing. ‘Maybe he’s out there, watching us.’

‘We’ll know about *that* soon enough if he is,’ Robbins growled, drawing and cocking the Colt.

‘Wally says that Texas boy can sure shoot!’ Eli went on in a worried tone. ‘He says he never even saw that boy’s hand move, but it sure must have ‘cause he done got his gun out and shot Massa Spargo through the head.’

‘Shut up and get the gear packed!’ Robbins spat out.

‘If you says so, sah!’ Eli answered.

‘Hey, Rocket!’ yelled Skench. ‘Hardin’s not in there.’

‘Looks that way!’ Robbins answered. ‘Get the boys here.’

Clearly not only Eli had thought that Hardin might be somewhere close at hand. That showed in the way the men

from the sides and rear of the building threw darting glances towards the woods as they made their way towards their leader. A great horned owl, flitting through the trees in search of its prey, cut loose with its eerie, hooting call and caused men to swing around with guns pointing in the direction of the sound.

The sight of his companions' behavior made Robbins feel nervous. While he doubted if Wes Hardin would chance attacking such a large party, he could not be certain of it. Born in a frontier land, trained through necessity to handle guns from an early age, still young enough to be reckless, Hardin might not count the odds in his anger. If so, the posse would offer easy targets framed by the light of the fire.

When no attack came, Robbins' nervousness ebbed away. Growling an order for Skench to accompany him, he entered the gate and walked towards the bodies.

'It's Hardin's pard and the town doctor,' Skench said. 'Hell's fire, Rocket, I didn't count on this.'

'How do you mean?' growled Robbins, although he knew the answer due to his own feelings.

'Killing the doctor. How'll we explain it away?'

Having already given rapid thought to that problem, Robbins could supply an answer. 'Either that Hardin shot him as he ran from the house to warn us. Or say the doctor was consorting with a wanted criminal and was shot helping Hardin to escape.'

While he felt no personal animosity towards either Wes Hardin or the dead doctor, Robbins refused to let any incident cloud the way in which his rockets worked.

Five - Get Hardin, Preferably Dead

In Bonham a group of male citizens breaking up their regular Thursday night poker game saw the glow of flames in the sky. Immediately they put aside all thoughts of going to their respective homes and raised the alarm. While the small town could only boast a volunteer fire brigade, which possessed no formal equipment, its citizens did not lack public spirit. Grabbing up buckets from their homes, men mounted horses and set off at a gallop towards the fire. Other people hitched up buggies and buckboards, loading in shovels or such other implements as might be needed, then followed the first party at the best speed they could manage.

The firefighting parties passed the posse on the trail without becoming aware of its existence. Smarter than his companions, Robbins had foreseen bad trouble over the arson, and more particularly, the killing of Doctor James. Maybe the men of the State Police could cow the local townspeople under normal conditions; but that might easily change, given the right provocation. The doctor had been a popular figure in Bonham and Fannin County, and many of the people rushing to quell the blaze were his friends. Meeting the posse and seeing James' body slung across the saddle of a horse, the citizens would draw the correct

conclusions. In which case they might start shooting before Robbins could lay the blame on Hardin.

So, although the people from town saw the fire, they knew nothing of the full horror behind it. A check on the barn showed them that the house had no occupants, by its lack of horses. While unable to halt the fire in the main building, they concentrated on preventing it spreading to the rest of the property.

Hearing hooves, one of the women by the buggies turned to see a tall, gaunt, soberly dressed man approaching. Parson Joel Hardin brought his horse to a halt, the big black-and-tan hound sinking down at its side as he dismounted. Anger and concern showed on his leathery, bearded face as he looked at the blazing ruins of his home.

‘Thank the Lord you’re safe, Joel!’ the woman gasped.

‘It was a love of coon-hunting rather than divine providence that served me, Hortense,’ Hardin answered. ‘Where’s Doc James?’

‘I haven’t seen him. Is somebody hurt?’

‘He was waiting for me here, with young Flip Smith.’

‘They’re not out here,’ another woman stated, then she gasped and swung to look across the garden. ‘Oh Lord! They might be inside.’

‘If they are, may the good Lord give them rest in peace,’ Hardin growled and walked through the gate followed by his hound.

Nothing in the house could have survived the conflagration. Nor could any of the crowd say how it

started. In common with many small Texas counties, the sheriff of Fannin also acted as Bonham's town marshal. So the citizens lacked a peace officer to start investigating the cause of the blaze. At that moment most of them were too busy fighting to save the barn and other buildings to think much on the matter. Looking around, Hardin felt a growing anxiety and certainty that his guests had perished inside. The absence of their horses meant little. If they had left earlier, the sight of the flames would have brought them back. More likely the fire had spooked the animals, causing them to pull their reins free and then run.

'Good thing you weren't inside, Joel,' said the leathery old Wells Fargo agent, a tough veteran of the Texas War of Independence. 'What happened?'

'I think the State Police did it,' Hardin admitted. 'Only don't tell any of the others, Moses.'

'Some of 'em were in town earlier, that's for sure,' Moses Adkin said, then he realized that Hardin probably knew nothing of the day's events. 'Young John Wes got hisself into trouble—'

'I know, he met me on the trail and told me about it.'

'No matter what the State Police say, none of it was his making. They were in town tonight, asking after him and giving it out that nobody'd best claim it wasn't him who shot Bill Waggets.'

'Moses!' Hardin put in. 'Doc James and young Flip were here.'

'The hell you say!' Adkin burst out. 'Inside?'

‘That I don’t know,’ Hardin admitted. ‘But I think so—’

While speaking, the two men walked towards the front of the house. The fire fighting party had trampled down the truck garden, covering over signs which would have told that the State Police posse crossed it to gather before the house. Ranging ahead of his master, the hound came to a halt, thrusting his nose to the ground, snuffling at it and whining.

‘What’s up with Bucky?’ demanded Adkin.

Going to the dog’s side, the two men looked down. The fire still burned bright enough for them to see the dark, still slightly moist patch on the ground under Bucky’s nose. Easing the dog aside, Hardin bent and scooped up a little of the earth on his forefinger.

‘Blood!’ he breathed. ‘Two lots of it, I’d say.’

‘And me!’ the agent answered. ‘That means—!’

‘Yeah!’ interrupted Hardin. ‘Did you meet anybody on the way here?’

‘Nope.’

‘Hear any shooting earlier?’

‘Nope. Way the wind is, took with the trees all round, it’s not likely we would. You reckon them stinkin State Police—Hellfire, Joel! Just let me get some of the boys and we’ll—’

‘No, Moses,’ Hardin snapped. ‘That’s no answer.’

‘Dammit, Joel!’ Adkin replied, holding his voice down to the same level as his companion. ‘They killed Bill Waggets, and now Doc.’

‘It looks that way.’

‘Then maybe we should sit back and do nothing?’

‘That’s all we can do right now,’ Hardin answered quietly. ‘You know what Ole Devil, Charlie Goodnight and others’re trying to do?’

‘Sure.’

‘It’s something that needs doing bad. And there’s plenty, including Davis ‘n’ Smethurst, who’re looking for a way to stop it. We mustn’t give them that way, not even to avenge Bill and Doc.’

Adkin might be a hot-tempered, irascible old cuss and a fighting man from soda to hock, but he knew the value of discretion. Like every Texan, he followed the campaign for the return of their rights with considerable interest and had no wish to jeopardize its chance of success.

‘How about Wes?’ he asked. ‘If the boy hears what’s happened, he’s likely to be back and looking for the men who did it.’

‘With any luck he won’t hear,’ Hardin answered. ‘I told him to go hide out until I’d had chance to come into town and find out just how bad the situation might be.’

Although interested, Adkin did not ask about Wes’ hiding place. Nor did Joel Hardin mention it. Not that he mistrusted Adkin, but because he did not wish to make his old friend a party to information the State Police might want. If Adkin had known, he could have warned that a couple of Caxton’s cowhands came along to help fight the fire. Not knowing, he said nothing and the cowhands rode off to their ranch without Hardin seeing them.

‘It’s bad,’ commented the agent. ‘I’m wanting to see how them stinking State Police get around killing Doc and young Flip.’

Next morning in Bonham, Adkin had his wish granted. Robbins called a number of the town’s leading citizens, including Hardin and the agent, to the sheriff’s office. Backed by three of the white State Police officers, he told of the attack on the cabin omitting all reference to the part his rockets played. Nor did he stick entirely to the facts in other aspects, for he claimed that Flip had followed the doctor from the cabin and had shot James while firing at the posse.

Watching the faces of his audience, he tried to decide how they took the story. Every man present had a sizeable stake in the community; his own business, in all but Adkin’s case. So they could be relied upon to think long and cautiously before acting in a hostile manner.

‘How’d the fire start?’ Adkin demanded.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Robbins blandly. ‘Maybe that kid knocked the lamp over, or something like that.’ Then he turned his attention to Wes’ father. ‘I’m real sorry for what happened, Parson, but it was through no fault of mine. All we aimed to do was ask your son to come in for a hearing.’

Behind Robbins, Skench and the other two State Police officers tensed and rested their hands on the guns at their hips. Yet none of the townsmen showed the skepticism they must have felt at the words. A couple darted glances in

Hardin's direction as if seeking guidance, but he stood like a statue and his bearded face gave no hint of his thoughts.

'You didn't catch John Wes then?' Adkin finally asked.

'No,' admitted Robbins. 'Do you know where he is, Parson?'

'Not for sure,' Hardin replied, figuring an evasion excusable after such blatant lying.

'Look, I know there're a whole heap of lies going around about us State Police,' Robbins said. 'So I've been leaning over backwards to see justice's done. I sent off a man to ask General Smethurst to appoint a new sheriff and to send a responsible official to hold an inquiry into what happened in the office here. Likely they'll be in town tomorrow. Can you get your son here by then, Parson?'

'I don't know,' Hardin answered. 'It depends on whether I can find him.'

'Try,' Robbins ordered, but in the tone of a man making a helpful suggestion. 'I'd send my men along, but that might start trouble. So I'll leave it to you to fetch him in.'

Being a shrewd man, Robbins had played his hand in a way he hoped would not only avoid trouble but show the State Police in a good light. When the story broke in State, or even national newspapers, it would be said that the much-maligned force had made every effort to play fair in the matter. When young Hardin did not show up for the hearing, people who were ignorant of the facts would assume him to be guilty.

Equally shrewd, Hardin followed the other's line of thought and wondered if he should chance his son's life by sending word for Wes to come to town.

'I'll think on it and see what can be done,' he promised.

'Thanks, Parson,' Robbins replied. 'And I reckon we'd best have the saloons closed today. So there'll be no danger of any incidents.'

'We've dead to bury, mister,' Hardin told him. 'The saloons will be closed.'

Late that afternoon a crowd of Bonham's citizens gathered in the graveyard, forming a half-circle around the two graves. Probably most of the people attended out of respect for Doctor James, Flip being an orphan and his ranch crew not in the area. Yet the youngster was to have one mourner.

Hearing the sound of an approaching horse, a few of the crowd turned. Then a low mutter of surprised comment rose as they saw Wes Hardin halt his horse at the graveyard's fence. Swinging from the saddle he tossed the reins over the fence and walked forward. Although none of the people believed that Wes had killed Sheriff Waggets, most felt he was acting unwisely in coming back to town.

For a moment Parson Hardin's voice wavered in its resonant delivery of the burial service, then picked up as if nothing had happened. He followed a sturdy, practical religion of the kind which advocated 'Give praise unto the Lord, but keep the powder dry.' The story was told that he had once held a service for a company of Texas Rangers

while hunting Indian raiders. During the reading of the lesson, a bunch of Kiowa bucks appeared on a distant rim and launched an attack. For all that Parson Hardin continued to thunder out his lesson, keeping one eye on the charging enemy, and timed its end so his congregation could turn to deliver a devastating volley at the enemy.

Despite his concern at Wes' return, he refused to hold up in what he regarded as doing his duty. Not until he had completed the ceremony and dirt began to thud on to the coffins did the old man draw back with his son.

'Why'd you come back here, boy?' he demanded, taking Wes' arm and steering him towards the fence.

'A couple of Caxton's boys brought word about what happened to the house—'

'That could be rebuilt.'

'Flip was my pard,' Wes went on.

'You've got to ride, boy,' Hardin answered, guessing his servants had told Wes of the killings. 'There're State Police in town right now and they want you. Sure their captain talks about only wanting to hold a hearing to learn what happened, but he's lying in his teeth.'

By that time they had reached the gate and came to a halt. The graveyard was situated in a grove of trees to the north of town and out of sight of the buildings. However any hope Hardin nursed of his son not being seen from Bonham ended. Flanked by Wally and another Negro, Skench walked from among the trees. Although the white man did

not hold a gun, his companions carried their carbines gripped in both hands.

'State Police!' Wes hissed. 'That Negro with the Winchester was with the feller who killed Bill Waggets.'

'It's no use running,' Hardin replied. 'Just stand alongside me and leave me do all the talking.'

'Sure, paw.'

With around twenty feet separating them, Skench came to a halt and looked at the Hardins. If he had expected the youngster to return for the funeral, Skench would have demanded more support when ordered to keep watch on the graveyard. However, seeing Wes ride up, he had told his companions what to do and led the way to make the arrest.

'This's my son,' Hardin announced.

'So Wally here tells me,' Skench replied.

'He's come in for a hearing, like that captain of your'n wanted.'

'That's what he wanted. So if the boy hands over his guns —'

'Give *me* your gunbelt, John Wes,' ordered Hardin.

For a moment Wes hesitated. Then he brought his hands towards the belt buckle, ready to obey his father. Immediately Wally started to swivel around the Winchester and the other Negro brought up his Springfield carbine. Ready for treachery, both the Hardins reacted with some speed. Yelling a warning, the old man thrust his son one way and threw his body the other. Even so the push would

not have been needed for Wes already started to move and sent his hands crossing to the butts of his Colts.

While the State Police armed its members—at their own expense—it offered them neither facilities nor inducements to achieve proficiency in using the weapons. So the Negroes lacked the ability to react swiftly under such conditions. Both carbines cracked, but their bullets did no more than pass through the space where Wes had stood. No faster, Skench drove his right hand downwards at the gun holstered on his hip.

In falling, Wes drew his Colts and landed holding a cocked weapon in both hands. At the same time his brain analyzed the situation and formed its conclusions. Of the two Negroes, Wally posed the more immediate threat in that he held a repeater as opposed to his companion's single-shot Springfield. Already both of them had begun the process of unloading, but doing so would be far faster in Wally's case. So the right hand Colt roared as Wes landed on the ground, driving its load between Wally's eyes to tumble him backwards before he could complete working the Winchester's lever. An instant later the left hand Colt spewed its conical ball into Skench, catching him in the belly and doubling him over with his gun still not clear of leather.

Rolling right over and away from his father, so as to draw any fire in his own direction, Wes cocked the Colts. By then the second Negro had the Springfield's trap-door breech raised ready for the insertion of a cartridge. Wes did not

wait to see what followed. Once more his right hand Colt cracked, its bullet ripping into the Negro and spinning him around, the Springfield falling from his hands.

Although the crowd in the graveyard had witnessed the arrival of the State Police, everything had happened so quickly after it that none could tell for certain what exactly had happened. All they knew for sure was that three men were sprawled on the ground and Wes Hardin was starting to rise, smoking Colts in his hands.

‘Why, paw?’ he groaned. ‘Why’d they do it? I was taking the belt off.’

‘They wanted you dead, boy!’ Hardin replied. ‘And that’s how they’ll want you even more after this. Get a’fork your hoss and ride.’

‘Where to?’

‘Anywhere as long as it’s clear of this neck of the woods.’

‘Shall I head for the Rio Hondo?’

‘It may be best,’ Hardin admitted. ‘Even if Devil can’t do anything for you, the Rio Grande’s close to hand and you’ll be safe from the State Police across in Mexico.’

‘How about you?’ Wes asked.

‘I’ll be safe enough. Get going. If you’re still here when the rest of them come, this whole place could be flowing with blood.’

Listening to the low rumble of talk behind him, Wes guessed what his father meant. Already public feeling ran high over the killing of Doctor James, for the story Robbins put out had been privately discounted. If the State Police

came, at least a portion of the crowd would side with Wes. Even if they defeated Robbins' posse, more of the Police would come and be backed by the Army.

So Wes once again accepted that flight was the only answer. And there could be no turning back, no staying at Caxton's place until he saw how things went. Already the State Police wanted him for killing one of their officers. They would never rest now that four had fallen to his gun.

Going to his horse, Wes mounted and looked at his father. 'I'm sorry, paw.'

'So am I, boy,' Hardin replied. 'These are sorrowing times. Now take to riding and this time don't come back.'

At about the time Wes rode up to the graveyard, Robbins greeted General Smethurst's representative at the sheriff's office. In addition to the bulky, bearded Major Hopkins, a tall, slim young man stood in the room. He wore a black town suit, plain white shirt, black tie and carried a Stetson of the same color. Although dressed for mourning, his face showed no signs of grief. A pearl-handled Smith & Wesson No. 2 Army revolver's butt showed from a silk sash he wore around his waist.

Outside the office, an escort of twenty soldiers mingled with the State police, an Osage Indian scout and a pair of hard cases who wore low-hanging guns but no badge of office.

'You know Noah Spargo?' Hopkins asked Robbins.

'We've not met,' Robbins answered. 'Howdy, Spargo. I'm sorry about your brother.'

‘Noah’s been appointed sheriff by the General,’ Hopkins continued when Spargo did not reply. ‘He’s brought Baker and Sturgis along to act as his deputies.’

‘There’s been some lies spread about Adam’s death, so I hear,’ Spargo put in. ‘One thing we’re here for is to put a stop to them.’

‘How about this young Hardin?’ Hopkins asked, after Robbins told how he had handled the situation. ‘How’re the chances of his coming in?’

‘I don’t know,’ Robbins admitted. ‘His old man’s a wily bastard who doesn’t show anything except what he wants you to see.’

‘If he comes in, I’ll handle him,’ promised Spargo.

At that moment one of the men stepped in from the street. ‘There’s shooting out at the graveyard. Colts and carbines I’d say.’

‘Come on!’ Robbins snapped. ‘I had some of my men watching in case young Hardin showed for the funeral. Let’s see how they’ve done.’

Robbins’ party saw and did not like the sight. On arrival they found Skench and Wally dead, with Parson Hardin doing what he could for the dying second Negro. All the rest of the mourners, following Hardin’s advice, had left the graveyard, but several hovered in the background. Enough to make Hopkins and Robbins think twice before deciding to restrict themselves to vocal questions about the affair. Hardin told the truth of the affair, refusing to say which way his son had gone.

‘Get after him, Robbins!’ Hopkins ordered. ‘Take that Osage, he stinks like a dead skunk, but he can sure read sign. You’ve got to get young Hardin.’

‘That’s for sure,’ Robbins admitted, darting a glance at the old man who was walking away. ‘Reckon he knows where the boy went?’

‘I don’t know, likely he does, but you’d never get it out of him—and I wouldn’t advise you to try.’

‘If we try it, there’ll be some of us not leave here alive,’ Robbins agreed. ‘I’ll get going.’

Both Robbins and Hopkins understood the urgency. A force like the State Police ruled by fear, not through cooperation with the majority of the public. Let one man defy them, kill some of its members, and not be captured, then others would start to fight back. Only by showing themselves relentless in hunting down the man who had killed four of their officers—that he had shot in self-defense and to avoid being murdered by them made no difference—could the Police hope to avoid wholesale trouble. With that thought in mind, the word went out to every officer of the force—

‘Get Hardin, preferably dead.’

Six - Hole Up Across the River

For over four months the State Police had been hunting Wes Hardin, showing a surprising strength of purpose in view of their normal indolence when enforcing the law. Robbins, granted every facility by the Governor, demonstrated his organizing ability in the hunt which ensued after losing Wes' trail when he left Bonham. Using the spreading network of the telegraph, or sending the word by fast-riding couriers, Robbins alerted State Police and sheriffs' offices to the south of Fannin County in an attempt to prevent Wes reaching Ole Devil Hardin at the Rio Hondo. Other officers, backed by Army patrols, visited every trail drive headed north and checked its crew.

Sheer luck saved Wes during the early days, along with a skill at riding which few of his pursuers could equal. Although he lost his original hunters, the search continued. Time after time he thought himself forgotten, or that the hunt might be dying down, only to be located by members of the State Police and made to run again. On two occasions he was forced to shoot himself out of danger and by a coincidence each time cut down a man who had been in the original posse. While he did not know them as such, and harbored only thoughts of self-preservation, a rumor started that he intended to wipe out every man who had ridden with Robbins on the night Flip and James died.

Cut off from possible safety in the south, warned of the danger should he try to go north with a trail herd, Wes showed good sense by sticking to the mid-Texas counties. Finding that he had shaken off his pursuers for a time, he hired as a cowhand to a small spread on the Trinity below Denton. There he worked for almost three weeks before a peddler, who also sold information to profitable markets, recognized him while passing. The Davis administration had placed a bounty of a thousand dollars on Wes' head, all the inducement the peddler needed to become aware of his civic duty.

Three Negro State Police officers visited the ranch, forcing their way into the house and abusing the owner's wife. Her screams brought Wes on the run from where he had been working in the barn. When the smoke cleared, one of the officers lay dead, the second seriously wounded and the third fled for help as fast as his sorry horse would go.

Much would be said in later years of the fact that Wes killed several Negroes in his early days on the run. It was conveniently forgotten that every one of them had deliberately sought him out with the intention of shooting him. Picked from the worst of the colored element, the State Police officers were encouraged by their superiors to be truculent, overbearing and deliberately provocative when dealing with the white people to whom they might be supposed to give protection. Nor did those who received appointment to the Police restrict their tyranny to white

people, but were arrogant and despotical when dealing with their own kind.

Hearing that Wes had once more killed Negro officers, the most heinous crime possible in the eyes of the 'If he's black, he's right' bigots who ran Texas, a further massive hunt was mounted. Conscious of his previous failure, Rocket Robbins gathered men and rode out in the hope that he might finish off the work begun at the Hardin cabin.

Once again Wes tried to go south in the hope that Ole Devil might be able to help him in some way. Pursued by a posse from Denton, he found himself pushed to the northeast instead of in his desired direction. Kept on the move by more State Police out of Fort Worth, he avoided other officers from Greenville. Then a posse of Sulphur Springs officers turned him westwards. Delta offered no shelter, only more men on his trail.

So Wes found himself riding along the banks of the Sulphur River, going upstream. A posse followed, although he did not know how far behind they might be. Under him, the bay was lathered and so leg-weary that he kept following the comparatively even river trail instead of striking off across country. For several miles the Sulphur wound its way through a wide valley, sticking to its left side. Across the river, the valley's side rose in sheer bluffs which at some points came down to the water's edge, then fell back to leave pockets of land, varying in size, between the water and the walls. To the other side, the valley bottom

spread green, pleasant and fairly level, then its side rose in a gentle bush, tree and rock dotted slope.

Ahead the trail followed a bend in the river and disappeared from Wes' view. Bringing the bay around the curve, he found himself faced by a trio of riders, each leading three horses. Even as Wes hauled his mount to a halt, left hand tugging back at the reins and right fanning across to the nearside Colt, certain facts sprang to mind.

First to strike him was that none of the trio looked like members of the State Police. Unless he missed his guess, they were Texas cowhands. Two, in fact, looked to be superlative specimens of that reckless, hard-working breed. Wes conceded one of them to be the finest specimen of manhood he had ever seen.

At the right of the trio, sitting a huge blood-bay stallion with easy grace despite his giant size, the man who so attracted Wes' attention fully justified the conclusion. Six foot three, if an inch, in height, golden blond hair and an almost classically handsome face topped an enormous spread of shoulders. The excellently tailored shirt he wore could not conceal the full bulge of his biceps and he trimmed down at the middle in a manner which hinted at a giant's strength. Like his blue shirt, the levis pants had been made to his measure; such a perfect fit could never come off the shelves of a general store. Something of a dandy dresser, his costly white Stetson hat carried, a silver-concha decorated band and his boots the star motif most Texans selected as decoration for their leatherwork. Around

his waist hung a gunbelt, hand-tooled to a degree of excellence rarely seen, with matched ivory-handled Army Colts in the contoured holsters. While of the finest Best Citizens' Finish, the guns hung just right and gave the impression of being functional fighting weapons.

The man on the left of the trio also caught the eye, although in a different way. Lacking three inches of the blond giant's height, he had a lean, wiry build that denoted whipcord power and whang-leather toughness. That despite an Indian-dark face of almost babyishly innocent handsome features. With the exception of the walnut handled Dragoon Colt riding butt forward at his right side and the ivory hilt of the James Black bowie knife sheathed at the left of his belt, he wore all black. From hat to boots, including his gunbelt, his clothing stuck to that sober hue. It added to the wild, almost alien appearance, being aided by the relaxed yet ready as a compressed steel spring manner in which he sat the great, magnificent white stallion between his legs.

By comparison with his companions the third man faded almost into insignificance. At most he would be no more than five foot six inches tall, and while good looking was not so in the eye-catching way of the other two. Curly dusty blond hair showed from under a black Texas-style Stetson hat. While he dressed in clothes as expensive and well made as his companions, he contrived to make them look like poor quality hand-downs. Nor did the finely tooled gunbelt he wore and twin bone handled Army Colts, butt forward in

their holsters, seem to make him the more noticeable. Astride a seventeen-hand paint stallion of beauty and breeding, he looked like a nobody. A closer study would have shown that his small frame possessed a muscular development as good as the blond giant's, in proportion to their sizes, and his face carried lines of strength, intelligence, power far beyond what one would expect at the first glance.

It was at the small man in the center that Wes looked the hardest. All three of them reacted to his appearance and actions with some speed, showing themselves capable of rapid movement in an emergency. From cradled across a black shirtsleeve, the dark youngster's Winchester swung around and, although held at waist-level, lined at Wes. Down dropped the blond giant's big right hand, sliding the offside Colt from its holster in the incredibly swift, yet deceptively smooth motion of a master at the fast draw arts.

Fast though the first two moved, their small, insignificant companion bettered them. Moving so fast that the eye could barely follow it, his left hand flipped over and drew the right side Colt. He had the Colt out and lined before Wes' gun cleared leather, but did not shoot.

'Wes!' he yelled instead.

Recognition had come to Wes at the same instant, causing him to hold his fire.

'Dusty!' he gasped.

Letting his Colt slip back into leather, Wes urged the bay forward to where his cousin sat waiting. Never had any

sight been so welcome to Wes' eyes than coming face to face with Dusty Fog.

Despite his insignificant appearance, the small man on the paint stallion already bore a name famous throughout Texas. Back in Arkansas during the Civil War, Dusty Fog came into prominence as a fighting cavalry leader equal to the South's other two military raiders, Turner Ashby and John Singleton Mosby. Being a Texan born and raised, Dusty's fame exceeded the other two in the Lone Star State. Many tales had been told of his exploits as captain commanding the Texas Light Cavalry's hard-hitting, hard-fighting Company 'C': how he went behind the Yankee lines to give evidence at the court martial of an officer charged with cowardice and while there killed a Yankee general in a duel ⁱⁱ ; how he prevented Texas from being engulfed in a bloody Indian war two liberal-intellectual Union bigots tried to start ⁱⁱⁱ ; that he captured a Union Army paymaster's coach and used the money to buy arms for the South ^{iv} ; and how he went with the Rebel Spy to New Orleans, helping her to smash a forging ring who planned to flood the Confederate States with counterfeit money. ^v

Nor did the end of the War bring pause to Dusty's fame. Returning to the Rio Hondo country, he buckled to on the task of rebuilding the Hardin, Fog and Blaze clan's depleted fortunes. Men spoke of him as the *segundo* of the biggest ranch in Texas, claimed him to be a cowhand second to none, mentioned in awe his uncanny ability at defending himself without weapons. Mostly they told of his speed on

the draw and deadly accuracy, claiming more and more that he was the fastest gun in Texas.

That then was the man whom Wes Hardin greeted—a man not yet in his twenty-first year.

‘Howdy, Cousin Dusty,’ Wes greeted.

While shaking hands, Dusty studied his cousin. They had not met since just after the War, although news of Wes’ troubles had reached the Rio Hondo country. Looking at Wes, Dusty saw changes in the other that he did not like but could understand. Being constantly hunted had driven out all the friendly cheerfulness Dusty could remember, replacing it with a tight-lipped, watchful tension he knew all too well. There sat a loaded and cocked revolver, ready to explode into deadly action.

‘Howdy, Wes,’ Dusty replied gently. ‘I don’t reckon you’ve met Mark Counter and the Ysabel Kid. Mark, Lon, this here’s my cousin, Wes Hardin.’

The first name meant little to Wes. At that time Mark Counter had not yet come into prominence as Dusty’s right bower and a fighting man in his own right. Born the third son of a rich Big Bend rancher, he had chosen to roam instead of remaining at his home. During the War, as a lieutenant with Bushrod Sheldon’s cavalry, he gained a name as the Beau Brummell of the Confederate Army. Soon his sartorial taste would dictate what the well-dressed Texas cowhand wore, just as his choice of uniform had been much copied by the young bloods of the South.

Yet there was more than a mere dandy-dresser about Mark. Already he had few peers as a cowhand. Tremendously strong, his skill in a roughhouse brawl would be remembered wherever it was seen. While very fast with a gun, he would never receive full credit for his capability in that line, due to riding in the shadow of the Rio Hondo gun-wizard. Later, the few who knew claimed him to be a very close second to Dusty in that line.

While Wes did not at that time know Mark, he had heard of the Ysabel Kid. Son of a wild Kentucky-Irishman and a beautiful Comanche-French Creole girl, the Kid had been raised as a fitting grandson to Chief Long Walker, war leader of the *Pehnane* band of that tribe. ^{vi} To prepare him for his future with the Wasps, Quick-Stingers, Raiders—as the word *Pehnane* could be interpreted—he learned to ride any horse ever foaled; to read sign and locate hidden enemies where lesser men might see nothing; how he could move in silence through even the thickest cover in daylight or night; where and how to find food on the Texas range land. Add to that a fair skill with his old Dragoon Colt, ability said to match that of James Bowie in the use of a knife, the sighting eye and rifle-wisdom of a Kentucky hill-man, and it could be seen that the Ysabel Kid made a fighting force to be reckoned with. Down on the Rio Grande he grew to fame as a border smuggler well versed in the hidden ways of the river. The border Mexicans called him *el Cabrito*, holding him in awe as a good friend—or a mighty deadly enemy.

Nothing Wes saw about the Kid led him to doubt the border Mexicans' judgment in the matter. Two red hazel eyes, cold and dangerous in such a young face, studied Wes for a moment.

'You act a mite edgy, *amigo*,' the Kid said, swinging the rifle back across his arm.

'Are they still after you, Wes?' Dusty went on, taking in the bay's condition and guessing at the answer.

Wes looked at the horses Dusty's party led. While three of them carried loaded packsaddles, all had the appearance of good quality riding animals. With one of them between his knees, he stood a better chance than a'fork the exhausted bay.

'They're still after me,' he agreed. 'I don't know how far behind—'

An answer came to that almost immediately and before he could make a request for the loan of a fresh mount. While they talked, after his study of Wes, the Kid had resumed his alert watchful scrutiny of the surrounding range. Caution was taught early to any Comanche boy; the lesson of seeing others before they saw him was drilled home until it became second nature. So he spotted the two riders topping the slope of the valley side a shade before they became aware of him and his companions. Even as the raising of a rifle sent its warning to the Kid, he noticed one of the newcomers was an Osage buck dressed as an Army scout, the other a flashily attired Negro.

‘Watch your back, Wes!’ he yelled, throwing his own rifle from its resting position to its place against his shoulder.

Fast though the Kid moved, he failed to prevent the Osage cutting loose with the Springfield rifle. Either the scout shot well, or received partial blessing from the Osage Great Spirit. He fired fast and might have been excused for missing. Instead the bullet slammed into the rump of Wes’ bay, angling forward into its chest.

Feeling the impact of the lead and the horse going down, Wes jerked his Winchester from its boot. He kicked free his feet from the stirrups and leapt clear of the falling horse.

Flame ripped from the Kid’s rifle, the crack of his shot drowning out the wind-carried bang of the Springfield. The Osage jerked backwards, his rifle’s barrel tilting into the air as he fell from his horse. Landing on the ground, Wes swiveled around. Fury filled him at the killing of the bay, but before he could raise and aim the Winchester, the Negro turned his horse and rode rapidly back out of sight.

‘Now me,’ Mark drawled, sliding the Winchester from its place under his left leg, ‘I’d say they’re not too far behind.’

‘Get on one of the horses, Wes!’ Dusty snapped. ‘We’d best make tracks.’

‘And back the way we come,’ the Kid concluded, starting to turn his horse.

Running towards his cousin, Wes caught the mane of the grulla gelding Dusty led and vaulted on to its bare back.

‘Cut him loose, Dusty!’ he yelled. ‘I’ll go my own way. They’ll figure I downed the Injun.’

'You're staying with us,' Dusty replied, making no move to obey but turning the horses. 'Unc—'

'Up there, Dusty!' interrupted the Kid, having swung around, pointing ahead.

Several men appeared at the top of the slope about half a mile from where the four Texans turned their mounts. Dusty summed up the situation rapidly, working out what to do for the best. There could be no running by the new arrivals along the trail, especially hampered by the led horses. From the direction the Osage and Negro came, and the latter fled, there would be more men behind them. So Dusty turned his attention to the river. Almost opposite where they sat, the bluffs curved back to leave a good-sized area well covered by bushes enclosed by the walls. Nor would the water prove an insurmountable obstacle, flowing gently and not more than two feet deep.

'We'll hole up across the river!' he ordered, starting to head the paint in the desired direction.

Maybe the other three topped him in a matter of mere feet and inches, but they never thought of questioning his judgment. Swinging their mounts and bringing the led horses around with them, Mark and the Kid followed Dusty's lead. Bullets flew around them as the horses churned up the Sulphur's surface. However, fired from the backs of moving horses, only pure luck would guide the lead to its target. Luck did not favor the State Police, although one bullet came so close to the Kid's head that he made an involuntary bobbing movement.

Then the horses reached the other side, pounding up the gravel slope on the opposite shore to the trail. On reaching the top, Dusty found to his satisfaction that he had judged correctly. Not only did the bushes grow thick enough to offer excellent cover, but the ground sank away into a hollow where the horses might be left in safety.

‘Go see if there’s a way up the bluffs, Lon!’ ordered Dusty, dropping from his low-horned, double girthed range saddle and sliding free his Winchester carbine. ‘Stake down the horses, Mark, and bring some shells. Wes, you and I’ll keep them jaspers across the water—but don’t kill any unless there’s no other way.’

Despite all the stories he had heard of the State Police’s inefficiency, corruption and brutality, Dusty could still not reconcile himself to killing appointed peace officers unless it became a complete necessity. So he gave the order and hoped his cousin would obey it.

Rifles in hand, Dusty and Wes lit down on the ground then flopped into cover at the top of the bank. Much to Dusty’s relief, Wes made no attempt to start shooting. Settling down, the youngster rested his rifle ready for use and studied the approaching party.

‘Two white men, the rest Negroes,’ he said. ‘State Police for certain sure.’

‘They’re not coming on anyways,’ Dusty answered, watching the two white men in the lead bringing their horses to a halt.

‘Likely waiting for help,’ Wes answered, following the direction in which one of the pair pointed.

More men rode into view over the rim where the Osage’s body sprawled. Without halting, or so much as a glance at the unmoving figure on the ground, the new arrivals galloped along the slope towards the first party. Six Negroes and a white man, Dusty counted. Stiff odds taken with the bunch they rode to join.

Coming together, the white men from each party began to talk and the Negroes mingled, also discussing the situation if their pointing fingers and gesticulations were anything to go on. Clearly the leaders of the posses did not come to an immediate agreement on a course of action and the big, smartly dressed newcomer pointed in the direction from which he came at one point, then turned in an angry manner to snap an answer to a question put by the others.

Mark returned from securing the horses, carrying his Winchester and two boxes of ammunition. Slipping into cover by his companions, he tossed one box to Dusty.

‘What’s doing?’ Mark asked.

‘Nothing much,’ Dusty admitted. ‘That feller in the artillery jacket’s wanting the others to wait for something, more men most likely.’

‘Looks like he’s getting his way,’ Mark commented, watching the other two ride back towards their men and the one Dusty mentioned advance towards the river.

‘Hey!’ Rocket Robbins yelled, halting his horse at a safe distance. ‘You down there!’

‘Yeah?’ Dusty answered.

‘That’s Wes Hardin with you. Send him on out and the rest of you can go.’

‘There’s a real tempting offer for you, Cousin Dusty,’ Wes grinned.

‘Happen we took it, I bet we’d get easy to the other side of the Sulphur afore they shot us down,’ Mark went on.

Dusty did not smile, but raised his voice again. ‘What happens to him?’

‘We’ll give him a fair trial,’ yelled one of the other white men. ‘Then we’ll hang him.’

Swinging around, Robbins snarled something at the speaker. It seemed as if he had not wanted such a comment made. With it made, there could be only one answer.

‘If you want him!’ Dusty shouted. ‘You’ll have to come over and get him.’

Seven - Ka-Dih's Done Forgot His Wandering Boy

'I couldn't've put it sweeter, nor better myself,' Mark drawled, settling his rifle a touch firmer against his shoulder ready for the rush which might be expected in reply to Dusty's defiance.

None came. Instead the posse remained on their horses, but unmoving. Turning back from his companions, Robbins drew a watch from inside his jacket.

'Listen, you cowhands!' he shouted. 'Hardin's not one of you now. He's a killer and running from the law. I'll give you ten minutes starting from now to get him sent out here. If he's not across the river, alive or dead, by then, we're coming after him and we'll treat you the same as him.'

'I'm going out, Dusty,' Wes said grimly.

'The hell you are,' Dusty answered. 'Stay put until we hear what Lon has to say about sneaking up the bluffs.'

'It'll be dark afore long,' Mark went on, looking at the sinking sun.

'Longer than ten minutes though,' Wes pointed out. 'There's no sense in you boys getting shot up on my part, Dusty.'

‘Uncle Devil sent us to see if we could help out,’ Dusty replied. ‘We’d’ve been here sooner, only we’d gone into the Rond River country after wild hosses and he couldn’t find us. As soon as we came in, he sent us off.’

‘Maybe we’d best hear all about it,’ Mark suggested.

‘Sure, Wes,’ agreed Dusty. ‘Start at the beginning and tell us it all.’

Quickly Wes went into details of how he came to be on the run, starting with the killing of the Negro and going through the events until meeting his cousin that afternoon. While keeping an eye on the State Police, Dusty listened to the story. The more he heard, the more he realized that helping Wes would be a very difficult and dangerous task. Several aspects of the business interested the small Texan and he asked about one of them.

‘Have you any idea how the fire started at your place?’

‘Nope.’

‘Does Uncle Joel know?’

‘I reckon not. He got word to me that a State Police posse went out there looking for me. Only I wasn’t there. They claimed my pard, Flip, killed Doc James when the fire drove them out.’

‘Flip’s dead,’ Dusty said.

‘They killed him and Doc James outside the house.’

‘So’s the sheriff and the Negro who was with Spargo. Everybody who knew what happened in the office.’

‘Sure, Dusty,’ Wes answered. ‘All of the—’

An interruption came before Wes could complete his bitter comment on the death of every witness capable of clearing him from the charge of murdering Sheriff Waggets. Only half the allotted ten minutes had gone by, but one of the white men let out a yell of 'Charge!'

While the posse did not show the concerted forward movement a company of drilled, disciplined cavalry might, they started their horses moving in a determined manner. Once on the move it became noticeable that the white men held back their horses, allowing the Negroes to come between them and the Texas rifles beyond the water. Wild with excitement, waving their carbines or rifles over their heads, the colored members of the posse continued to charge at the river.

'What now?' asked Mark, watching the onrushing posse.

'Hold them back without killing if we can,' Dusty replied.

'When do we figure they're not getting scared and stop trying?' Wes inquired as he lined his rifle.

'When they reach the water and start crossing,' Dusty told him.

With that the small Texan aimed his carbine carefully and touched off a shot to demonstrate what he wanted his companions to duplicate. His bullet ripped the derby hat from the head of the leading rider. Hauling back on his horse's reins, the startled Negro caused it to start sliding to a halt.

'Nice shot,' commented Mark, taking a careful sight on the rifle waved above another Negro's head.

Again powder cracked and the bullet flew right where Mark wanted it. Catching the rifle's foregrip, the flying lead batted it from the Negro's hand and caused him to let out a yelp of pain.

Seeing what Dusty had in mind, Wes looked for a suitable target. When the first Negro lost his hat, his slowing horse caused some confusion among the others. Cradling his Winchester, Wes peered along its barrel and squeezed the trigger. The lead spanged into the dinner-plate sized horn of a Negro's Mexican-style saddle and its rider fell backwards over the horse's rump as flying metal splinters hit him.

Again and again the Winchesters from the rim sent lead across the river. So carefully had the trio selected their positions that they offered only a small target. Far too small for marksmen of State Police quality to hope to hit when mounted on bullet-spooked horses. The charge lost its impetus, slowed down and turned to a retreat which the cursing white men could not halt.

Watching his white companions, Robbins smiled dryly. Although he had helped to plan the treacherous attack, insisting that they allowed enough time to elapse so that the Texans would believe the ten minutes would be granted, he felt no anger when it did not succeed. In fact he had hoped from the start that it would fail, preferably with some loss of life among the posse. Then he could make use of his rockets and gain acclaim by succeeding where more conventional methods failed.

‘What now?’ asked one of the Delta officers.

‘We do what I wanted in the first place,’ Robbins answered.

‘What?’ growled the second white man.

‘Wait for my boy to arrive with Old Spitter and root them out with rockets,’ Robbins stated. ‘Spread some of your boys along the slope, to make sure they can’t go up over the bluffs. Take the rest back there a-ways, then we’ll hold on until Eli brings my gear.’

While the other two guessed they were being used to further Robbins’ ambitions, neither could suggest a better plan. So they gave the necessary orders and withdrew up the slope.

‘Looks like they’ve had enough for now,’ Mark said, watching the retreat.

‘Don’t mean us to sneak away though,’ Dusty answered, indicating the men who had taken cover at various points along the opposite slope.

At that moment the Kid arrived, darting from cover to cover and settling at Dusty’s side.

‘Heard the shooting and watched ready to cut in from the flank—’

‘Just like a danged Comanche, all treacherous and sneaky,’ Mark put in.

‘Least we can hit something when we burn powder,’ answered the Kid. ‘All you did was make near misses.’

‘How’s it look, Lon?’ Dusty said, before his friends could begin their often repeated wrangling.

‘Waal now, Dusty,’ the Kid replied. ‘I’d say *Ka-Dih*’s done forgot his wandering boy.’

‘How’d you mean?’ Dusty asked, knowing *Ka-Dih* to be the name of the Comanche Great Spirit.

‘I done found a wild melon patch, but they’re all over-ripe—and there’s no way up that wall.’

‘None?’

‘Nary the one,’ the Kid confirmed. ‘Down where the wall comes on to the water, the river flows too fast for us to ride through.’

‘How about upstream?’ Mark inquired.

‘Near on the same. Deep water and no chance of riding through it fast.’

The Kid did not need to elaborate on his information. Without having it explained to them, the others realized their crossing of the river must be fast.

‘Looks like I’ve landed you in a real fuss, Dusty,’ Wes said.

‘He’d’ve found some way of doing it, even if you hadn’t,’ Mark assured him.

‘You can bet on that,’ the Kid agreed, noticing some new arrivals across the river. ‘Ole Dusty can find trouble just by—hey now, look up there. Damned if they’ve not got an itty-bitty cannon on a pack hoss.’

Following the direction of the Kid’s pointing finger, Dusty watched Eli ride up leading the loaded pack horse and accompanied by a small escort. For a moment the small Texan thought his companion was correct in identifying the thing on the horse’s packsaddle. However the lack of

wheels caused Dusty to make a more careful examination. He noticed Robbins galloping up the slope, but gave most of his attention to the Negro. When Eli dismounted, lifted down the launcher and set it upon the bipod legs, memory clicked for Dusty.

‘Hell’s fire!’ the small Texan breathed. ‘That’s no cannon. It’s a Hale Rocket Launcher. Wes, that Negro’s with the State Police. Maybe that’s how your house caught fire.’

‘Huh?’ Wes asked.

‘That thing there fires a rocket loaded with “liquid damnation”. Happen the State Police up your way had one along, they could easy set fire to the house; fixing to drive you out for the guns.’

‘Only I wasn’t there!’ Wes spat out. ‘Flip and Doc James come through the door and got shot down.’

‘You figure they aim to use that thing on us, Dusty?’ asked the Kid.

Already Robbins was standing by the rear of the launcher, adjusting its elevation and lining the sights. Working just as fast, Eli unloaded a rocket from the panniers and brought it to his employer.

‘I figure that’s just what they aim to do.’ Dusty agreed soberly.

‘We’ll have to stop them,’ said the Kid.

Much as Dusty wanted to avoid bloodshed, he knew it would no longer be possible. Everything Wes had told him convinced Dusty that his cousin was innocent of killing the sheriff and had shot down the State Police officers in

defense of his own life. The treacherous attack on them proved that the posse did not intend giving Wes a chance to surrender. Nor would they be inclined to overlook Dusty, Mark and the Kid's part in the affair. Given the chance, the State Police would cut them all down and think nothing of it.

So Dusty gave the order. 'Stop them!' he said. 'Get ready to cover Lon while he's doing it.'

Carefully the Kid moved forward and estimated the distance. Taking off his hat, he placed it on the ground before him and rested the rifle's barrel on its crown. Then he settled down to the business of taking a very careful aim.

Despite its maker's claims, the Winchester Model of 1866 rifle lacked accuracy at all but short range. While the leaf of the backsight carried graduations from one hundred to nine hundred yards, the Kid—stout Winchester supporter though he might be—admitted to himself that the upper distances were no more than wishful thinking on the part of the manufacturers. Twenty-eight grains of powder did not push the two hundred grain bullet with sufficient force to maintain a reliable flight at ranges of over three or four hundred yards. The results at greater distances, even in a master marksman's hands, left something to be desired.

Moving the slide of the sight up to the six-hundred-yard mark, the Kid studied all the other factors which affected a bullet's flight. He estimated the wind's speed and direction, tried to make allowance for slight variations in the quality of the powder, then prepared to shoot.

All the time the Kid worked, his companions kept a watch on the men across the river. If any of the posse saw the Kid's actions, and he tried to avoid attracting their attention, none made a move to prevent him. Satisfied that he could not improve on the lining of the sights, the Kid gently squeezed the trigger.

On the slope overlooking the Texans' position, Robbins was taking just as great care in setting up the launcher. So engrossed did he become that he paid no attention to certain significant activity across the river. Coming up, ignoring the way the other Negroes stood well clear, Eli looked across the valley.

At that moment the Kid's rifle cracked. He aimed at Robbins and his rifleman's instinct told him that he missed. However, despite his early comments it seemed that *Ka-Dih* still remembered the Kid. Blown off its desired line, the flat-nosed B. Tyler Henry bullet caught Eli in the shoulder. Letting out a screech of pain, the Negro spun around. Yet he still managed to retain hold of the rocket and did not let it fall to the ground. Not until he sank down to his knees did Eli allow his burden to leave him. More than that, he slid it base first on to the grass.

Sweat broke from Robbins' face as he saw the Negro hit and he took a hurried pace to the rear. In doing so he saved his life. Changing his aim while working the Winchester's lever, the Kid sent another bullet winging up the slope. It whipped by Robbins' head with an eerie 'Splat!' sound and caused him to retreat again. Shots cracked from the posse

and rifles across the Sulphur answered them. The efforts of Robbins' companions did not prevent a third bullet coming from the original Winchester. As if jerked by an invisible hand, Robbins' hat flew from his head. He needed no further warning. Somebody on the other shore had recognized the Hale launcher for what it was and was taking steps to counter its menace. Using it under those conditions would be dangerous in the extreme.

As Robbins threw himself into cover, the shooting died down and ended. He looked past the launcher to where Eli was crawling slowly and painfully towards cover. A low, disappointed curse broke from Robbins' lips as he realized that his assistant would not be able to help. Handling the rockets and launcher was work for at least two trained men. None of the other members of the posse possessed the knowledge to take Eli's place.

'How about it, Robbins?' demanded one of the Delta officers, coming up.

Annoyance at the other's attitude filled Robbins. The man was tall, lean, unshaven, wearing buckskins and moccasins, with a long-bladed Green River knife balancing the Colt at his belt. Rough, uncouth, truculent, Seth Salter also held rank as captain in the State Police and showed that he did not take kindly to Robbins butting in on what would be a profitable capture.

'How about what?' Robbins countered.

'When're we going to see that fancy gadget work?'

‘One of them down there knows what the launcher’s for and doesn’t aim to let me use it. He’s already dusted my hide and put lead into my Negro.’

‘That’s tolerable fair shooting for a cowhand,’ Salter remarked, eyeing the distance to the river. ‘Pull back a piece and see how he does.’

‘If I pull back any more, I’ll be over the rim and can’t lay aim on them,’ Robbins pointed out.

‘Then that there fancy doo-hickey’s not much use to us after all.’

‘The hell it’s not. We’ll wait until after dark. When they can’t see us, I’ll settle them but good.’

‘And they’re just going to sit tight and let you do it?’ Salter sneered.

‘We’ll keep men watching the river where the rock wall comes down to the water,’ Robbins explained, holding down his anger. ‘Then after dark move the others in closer and I’ll drop a few rockets over there.’

‘Only them Texans’ll’ve gone up the bluffs and be headed for the border.’

‘I’ve studied those bluffs behind them through my glasses,’ Robbins stated. ‘There’s no way they can take horses up and they’ll not go on foot. I’ll bet they’re fixing to wait until after dark, then rush us. Tell the men to take the horses back over the rim—’

‘Who’re you giving orders to?’ snapped Salter.

‘We tried it *your* way,’ Robbins answered. ‘If you want to try again, go right ahead. Only none of my bunch’ll be with

you. Those Texans weren't missing through bad aiming.'

'Damn the sons-of-bitches!' Salter spat out. 'If I could get among 'em I'd see how good they aimed.'

'I bet you would,' Robbins replied dryly. 'Let's get things ready, shall we?'

Not only Robbins gave thought to the next line of action. From his place on the other bank of the Sulphur, Dusty watched the two men come together and guessed at their conversation. While he did not know of the undercurrents between Robbins and Salter, he knew they would be deciding what to do next.

'That's got them worried,' he said. 'I'll bet they don't make another move afore dark.'

'What's that thing they was fixing to use?' asked the Kid.

'A launcher for rockets, likely using the Hale kind,' Mark told him. 'Didn't you see one in the War?'

'I helped use Hale rockets one time with Colonel John,' the Kid replied. 'Only we didn't have no fancy doo-hickey to shoot 'em out of.'

Before he and his father were sent to help smuggle goods through the Yankee blockade into Texas, the Kid had ridden with Mosby's Raiders and had seen conventional fighting. Once Mosby had used Hale rockets and the Kid, interested in all kinds of weapons, took time to learn how they worked; although he had not been impressed by the results they produced.

'Thing now being, what're we going to do?' Wes put in. 'We can't stay here, that's for sure.'

‘Can’t go anyplace either comes to that,’ commented the Kid. ‘Only he can’t use that fancy rocket shooter neither.’

‘Not while it’s light enough for you to see him he can’t,’ Dusty agreed. ‘But once it’s dark, he’ll cut loose.’

‘Even if he doesn’t hit us, the rockets’ll spook the horses,’ Mark went on. ‘That way we’re plumb likely to lose Cousin Phillippa’s wedding presents.’

‘That’s not all we’ll lose,’ Wes answered.

‘Say, I’d forgotten all about those presents,’ Dusty said quietly.

Since their first meeting in Mexico, while Dusty handled the delicate business of persuading General Sheldon to return to the United States, [vii](#) Mark had come to know the small Texan very well. Clearly the mention of the wedding presents had sparked off a thought train. Yet Mark could not see how several white sheets, four fancy table lamps and the other items loaded upon the packsaddles might be used to help them out of their predicament.

Then he learned. Slowly, thinking out each stage as he went along, Dusty told his companions what he planned to do. They listened in surprise, for the scheme sounded startling, novel, almost impractical. Yet, taking all things into consideration, it just might work.

‘We’ve only the four lamps, but enough oil for them,’ Mark commented.

‘Wood’s a mite short on this stretch, but I reckon I can rustle up enough for what we need,’ the Kid continued.

‘Can you do your part, Lon?’ asked Dusty.

‘If I can’t, Grandpappy Long Walker sure raised me wrong—as long as I can do it my way.’

Dusty knew just what that meant, but raised no objections. ‘I don’t figure they rate counting as peace officers, so do it your way. Now go pick four melons and the branches. Mark, come unpack the gear we’ll need. Wes, you’d best stay and watch those jaspers across the river.’

Eight - The Departure of Rocket Robbins

Night came down dark and moonless; ideal for the plans made by Dusty to save his party from the State Police. Hidden from the posse across the river, he helped Mark and Wes to put the final touches to their part in the forthcoming escape attempt.

Already the Kid stood prepared to handle his end of the business. While his three companions worked, he stripped off all his white man's clothing. Retaining only the bowie knife, he wrapped the gunbelt in his clothes and strapped the bundle to the cantle of his white's saddle. Then he donned the buckskin-fringed moccasins and breechclout of traditional Comanche blue which always accompanied him when he travelled. That and the big knife were all he figured to need for the work ahead.

'Dark enough for you, Lon?' asked Dusty, joining the Kid and leaving the other two to attend to fitting out the fourth horse.

'Just right,' answered the Kid. 'I'll be going.'

'I don't know how long you'll have, but it likely won't be long.'

'Then I'd best move off.'

'Do you still aim to try and take out that rocket launcher?'

'If it can be done safely. Without it they won't be so eager to attack. If I can't, I'll scatter their horses.'

'We'll stay on this side until they come,' Dusty told him. 'Unless they cut loose with rockets and force us out. But when we hear something from you, we'll let her rip all ways.'

'Yep,' agreed the Kid. 'And when you get over, head down river. I'll whistle up my ole Thunder hoss and catch you along the trail.'

With that he turned and faded into the darkness as silently as a shadow moving along a wall. Every minute delayed added to the danger of the assault starting, so he wasted no more time in talking.

While making sure the structure on the fourth horse's back was secure and would stay in place during rapid movement, Wes took time out to dart a glance in the Kid's direction. Then he looked back at Mark as the lean shape faded off into the bushes.

'Ole Lon looks like some danged Injun,' the youngster commented with a grin.

'He *is* an Indian,' Mark replied soberly and meant every word he said.

During the later part of the afternoon, as the sun finally sank beyond the western horizon, the Kid had made a careful and unseen study of the posse's positions. Three Negroes crouched in cover close to the trail and opposite both places where the bluffs curved back to join the water. Two more pairs had been interspersed between the trios

and the Kid made note of their positions. Up until dark the rocket launcher had remained where it had been placed by Eli before the Kid's bullet struck him. It stood in an open space between two large rocks, the panniers containing the rockets hidden behind them. Although the posse, less their lookouts, withdrew beyond the rim during daylight, they started to move back down the slope as night came. Unless the Kid missed his guess, they had halted halfway down and left their horses on the other side. Having assessed the situation, he felt sure that he could carry out his part in the plan.

While fully aware of the need for haste, the Kid did not allow it to lessen his inborn caution. Gliding silently towards the river's edge, he kept eyes and ears working full time. Ahead of him the water ran in a fast, but even flow over a fairly level gravel bottom. Then its surface became disarranged, ripples fanning towards the Kid's shore. At the same moment he heard a faint sound, a swishing that spelled danger to him.

Instantly the Kid came to a halt and sank behind a bush. His eyes raked the blackness ahead with an almost cat-like ability to pierce it. At first he saw nothing. Then a shape, stooping so as to appear almost deformed, moved slowly through the water. Crouching like a cougar above a deer trail, the Kid waited and watched.

The man who emerged from the water knew less about the business of silent movement than he imagined. That showed from the poor choice he had made in picking the

point at which he entered the river. However he came out on the Kid's side quietly enough. Few white men would have known of his presence until too late.

As Mark had told Wes, the Kid was no white man at that moment. A pure, unadulterated *Pehnane* Dog Soldier crouched in the blackness and watched the tall, half-naked shape slinking cautiously from the Sulphur River. Steel glinted in the dripping man's hand, further proof that he did not come on any peaceable or well-disposed mission. Showing what to the Kid seemed an almost suicidal disregard for the niceties of the affair, the man moved up the bank.

Rising in a swift, fluid motion, the Kid brought his bowie knife around in an upwards swing. Sharp as many a barber's razor, the eleven-and-a-half inch long, two-and-a-half inch wide blade passed under the other man's chin and sliced deep into the neck below. It was the blow taught by the *Pehnane* for the purpose of silently killing an enemy, severing the windpipe, vocal cords and jugular veins to prevent any chance of an outcry.

'*A'he!*' hissed the Kid, giving the traditional Comanche coup claim automatically [viii](#) as the knife bit home.

Then he closed with the stricken man, ignoring the blood spurting from the wound. Shock, pain and the rapid loss of blood almost caused the Kid's victim to faint and the dark youngster bore the other to the ground without trouble. Held down in a manner which prevented his dying struggles from being seen or heard across the river, Seth

Salter departed this life in the manner he had hoped to use on the Texans.

Not until he was sure that the other one lay dead did the Kid move. Ignoring the blood which smeared his chest and shoulders, he rose to his feet. No sound came from beyond the Sulphur to warn him that the killing had been witnessed. So he moved on. Unlike Salter, he did not commit the folly of entering the water from the open bank. Instead he talked along to where the bluffs converged with the river. Some of the urgency had left the situation. It seemed hardly likely that the State Police would cut loose with their rockets while a member of the posse was on the enemy's side of the river.

For all that, the Kid wasted no time. Feeling his way along the side of the bluff, he looked down at the water. Long action by the river's flow had carved a deep pool under the wall. Carefully the Kid lowered himself into this and sank with barely a ripple. If Salter had been so selective, he might still be alive.

Gripping the Bowie between his teeth, the Kid stayed underwater and struck out at an angle towards the posse's side of the Sulphur. The need for air caused him to come to the surface, but his head rose above it with no more disturbance than showed when a much-hunted otter came up to reconnoiter. Submerging again, he swam on until his forward-reaching hands touched the gravel as the bed rose towards the bank. Still the Kid stayed under, crawling along the river's bed and out on to the shore. Ahead of him, Wes'

dead horse still lay where it had fallen and across the trail, not ten yards along, one of the Negro pairs sat behind a rock. Being more engrossed in sharing a bottle of whiskey, they kept only a desultory watch.

Taking the knife from between his teeth, the Kid slid forward on his belly. He wriggled on to the trail in a way which kept the body of the horse between himself and the Negroes.

'What's that?' said a startled voice as the Kid reached the horse.

'Where?' asked the second Negro, lowering the bottle and following the direction of his companion's pointing finger. 'All I can see's that dead hoss.'

'I thought I saw something moving down there,' replied the first speaker.

Hearing the words, the Kid cupped his hands about his mouth and let out a near perfect imitation of a coyote's yipping call. While the sound might not have fooled another coyote, or even a man raised in Indian country, it appeared to serve its purpose.

'It ain't but one of them lil prairie wolves,' snorted the second Negro. 'And don't go knocking my arm again. Happen you make me drop this here bottle of miseries-medicine, I'll raise lumps on your pumpkin head.'

'Wonder when they's going to start attacking,' muttered the first man.

'Soon, real soon,' his companion answered. 'Boy, them rocket things is something to see. I was with Massa Robbins

when he used one against Preacher Hardin's place up to Bonham. Never seed a house take fire so quick in my life, and them two fellers come out like a coon off a burning log.'

With the men indulging in conversation, the Kid completed the tricky crossing of the trail. Once over the open ground, he rose and advanced at a faster but no more noisy pace. Going up the slope, he saw the bulk of the posse gathered ready to commence their attack. He ignored the sight, knowing that his duty was to scatter the horses or cause some other diversion, not tangle with them. Even as he went by, the Kid saw the posse halt and heard low, but excited voices.

Continuing to climb in the direction of the rocket launcher, he heard the sound of running feet also ascending. Ahead of him, in the same place as before, he could make out the shapes of the rocket and man standing alongside it. Then the runner went by, heading for where Robbins was waiting to commence the bombardment. Although unable to overhear what passed between the two men, the Kid sensed that the newcomer's news did not please the other. Letting out a louder curse than the rest of the speech, the burly man stalked away from the launcher and the other followed on his heels.

'Damn it to hell!' Robbins growled as he unsuspectingly passed the Kid. 'Why did that bastard Salter have to cross the river? The lousy son-of-a-bitch'll spoil everything.'

'Don't ask me, boss,' the Negro who had brought the news answered. 'He never said nothing, not even to Massa

Bilsden. If one of the fellers who'd been on watch hadn't spoked up, we wouldn't've known.'

The Kid moved on without waiting to hear any more, guessing that the man he had killed had crossed the river without consulting his companions. Cautiously approaching the launcher, he found no guards watching it. Apparently the possibility of an attempt to destroy it had never occurred to the State Police, which made the Kid's work just that much easier. Going up to the launcher, he examined it and found to his delight that a rocket, friction tube and lanyard in place, was already loaded. Looking around to make sure that he was not observed, he unscrewed and lowered the bipod legs. When he had finished, the launcher no longer pointed across the river, but slanted down in the direction of the posse. Carefully he unwound the lanyard, backing with it to the shelter of the nearest rock.

Before firing, the Kid paused and again looked around him. There did not appear to be any other members of the posse on the forward side of the slope, although he could hear voices beyond the rim. Judging by the sounds of horses moving, the speakers would be the guards of the State Police mounts. So he studied the best route to them as the next objective of his mission. Satisfied that there were no obstacles between himself and the posse's remuda, he turned back to the launcher.

Even as he took up the end of the lanyard, the Kid saw and heard the men below start moving towards the river.

He held his fire, however, watching the two shapes approaching him instead of accompanying the main body. Soon he recognized them as the Negro who had passed him on his way up and the burly white man who owned the rocket launcher.

Fury filled Robbins as he stalked back towards his weapon. On joining the main body of the posse he had spoken with Bilsden, second of the Delta officers, and what he had learned did not please him. In direct opposition to their carefully laid plans, Salter had crossed the Sulphur River. Although the man had announced his intention to wipe out the four Texans, Robbins doubted whether he could succeed in doing so. Bilsden had claimed Salter to be something of an expert in the art of silent movement, but Robbins felt little better at hearing the news. Let one of the quartet make an outcry and any who remained alive would be on the alert. Maybe they would make for their horses and charge across the river. Shooting in the darkness, the guards could easily miss and let the Texans escape.

Showing more faith than Robbins in Salter's ability, Bilsden had still agreed to move the men down the slope so as to give an added volume of fire should the rush be made. With his head full of thoughts of collecting the bounty on Wes Hardin's head, Bilsden had failed to notice that Robbins did not accompany him. Instead of going along, Robbins had caught the arm of the Negro who fetched him down from the launcher. One of the original Bonham posse,

the man had seen Eli help Robbins often enough to be of use.

Realizing how hampered he would be without Eli, Robbins had made preparations for the bombardment. Normally he would not have thought of fitting the friction tubes to his rockets until ready to use them. Lacking his assistant, he primed four of the Hales, leaving them clear of the fiery backlash which would flash from the launcher's trough. Five rockets ought to do all he wanted and even an untrained man could bring them to him.

'Is you-all fixing to fire off that thing with Massa Salter on the other side of the river, boss?' asked the Negro when Robbins finished explaining what he would be required to do.

'Sure I am!' Robbins snapped back. 'That stinking son-of-a-bitch had no right to go over there.'

'He could maybe get hisself hurt, boss,' the Negro pointed out.

'That's his worry,' Robbins answered. 'Let him take his chance, he's not going to spoil my chances.'

'Sure, boss.'

'You objecting to me doing it?' Robbins barked.

One thing a Negro learned, even among the liberal-intellectual ranks of the State Police, was never to become involved in his white brother-officers' troubles. That applied even more so when dealing with carpetbaggers such as Robbins and Salter. Out for their own profit, that kind brooked no interference and expected only cooperation

from the colored members of the Police. So the Negro shook his head answered vehemently.

‘No, sah. It’s ‘tween you and him!’

‘Come on then,’ ordered Robbins, sounding mollified. ‘Let’s get started. All I want you to do is bring me the rockets, one at a time, when I tell you.’

‘I can do that real easy,’ promised the Negro. ‘If they works as well as when we used them in Bonham, they’ll—’

‘What the hell!’ Robbins interrupted.

By that time they had come into sight of the launcher and he realized that something did not look right. For a moment he could not decide what was wrong, then he became aware that the angle of the tube had been changed.

While a number of ideas for the alteration sprang to Robbins’ mind, they did not include the correct one. He discarded the possibility of tampering by a member of the posse. Neither of his white companions had been up the slope to the launcher and the Negroes showed a marked reluctance to go near it. So he concluded that either the weight of the rocket in the trough had sunk the bipod legs deeper into the soil, or that the retaining screw had loosened in some way to allow the subsidence. Whatever the cause, he knew that adjustments must be made before discharging the rocket.

With that thought in mind, Robbins walked straight towards the launcher. He did not see the Kid who lay flattened on the ground close to the right side rock, being interested only in correcting the line of the tube and

turning loose its rocket before the posse drew too close to the river. All too well Robbins knew how uncertain was the flight of even a Spin-Stabilized Hale and wished to avoid accidents among his companions.

From his position, the Kid had seen the preparations for the attack and intended to disrupt it by sending a rocket down among the posse. While his intention had been to put the launcher out of action if presented with a chance, he never expected such a stroke of luck. Deciding it would be ungrateful to look a prime gift from *Ka-Dih* in the mouth, he prepared to make the most of his advantage. Across the Sulphur, Dusty waited for some signal before carrying on with the escape plan. He could be relied upon to act correctly when presented with such a fine opportunity.

Before the Kid could make his move, he saw Robbins coming closer and his marksman's ability told him that the tube pointed directly at the other. No Comanche would think of overlooking such a possibility. There walked the man whose efforts had caused the burning of Wes Hardin's home and the death of two comparatively innocent people. So, as the Kid saw it, simple yet effective justice would be done if he gave Robbins a taste of the same medicine.

With that thought in mind, the Kid tugged snappily at the lanyard. Lying on the ground, he found himself forced to make the pull in the correct slightly downwards angle desired by the friction tube's designer. For a moment the bar held, then drew its jagged edges over the percussion mixture.

Suddenly Robbins heard a familiar sound, yet its full implications failed to register on his mind. Full of angry thoughts at Salter's idiotic treachery, he continued to walk straight towards the yawning tube of the launcher. Just too late he realized that the sound had been the bar of a friction tube scraping at and igniting the mixture beneath it. His eyes caught a slight movement at the side of the right hand rock and he reached for his holstered revolver.

'Look out, b—!' began the Negro, suddenly and shockingly aware that something was very, *very* wrong.

The warning came as the main propellant charge took fire. Even as Robbins' brain clicked on to its danger, he saw flames and sparks gushing from the launcher's trough. With sickening, paralyzing horror, he realized that in some way the rocket had ignited and was rushing through the tube towards him.

One single terrified scream burst from Robbins' lips, almost drowned by the whooshing roar of the rocket belching from the barrel. Letting out a shriek of terror, the Negro flung himself backwards. He saw the rocket crash into Robbins' chest, heard the man's scream chop off as the impact flung him over. Then the detonating charge in the nose exploded into the 'liquid damnation' which burst over Robbins in a sea of living flame. However, the force with which the rocket struck home must have killed him instantly.

Thrown back by the impact, the shape, still a blazing travesty of human form, went tumbling down the slope.

Giving out another screech, the Negro turned and fled into the night. Not even the Kid's Comanche-hardened stomach could hold down a certain queasiness at the sight. Nothing his *Pehnane* teachers had ever described as a means of killing an enemy equaled that sight.

No Comanche wasted too much time in brooding on the manner in which a foe died. After a brief moment staring at the sight, the Kid rose and leapt to the pile of primed rockets. Gathering them up, he carried them to the panniers and rested all but one inside the containers. Backing off to what he hoped would be a safe distance, he hurled the rocket at the panniers. It struck and burst into flames, the fire licking up and around the leather cases. Then, without waiting to see the result of his work, he darted up the slope.

Attracted by the noise, the two horse herd holders came running the other way. Letting out a Comanche war scream, the Kid burst into their sight and charged at them. Already startled and concerned, the two Negroes fell back before the apparition. One of them tripped and sat down, his carbine banging harmlessly across his knees. Half deafened by the most hideous sound that could emerge voluntarily from a human throat, the second man discarded his weapon, spun around and fled.

Ignoring the pair, the Kid dashed towards the remuda. He saw that the horses had been off-saddled and were showing signs of nervousness. For all that, he made for what his instincts told him to be the best of the horses. Before the

animal could bolt, the Kid bounded astride its sixteen-hand-high back like a coon hopping on to a doghouse roof. Powerful legs locked around the horse's body and strong fingers gripped its mane. Once more that wild Comanche yell shattered the air, ringing out above the sound of shooting on the other side of the rim. The horses needed no more encouragement. From milling and fiddle footing, they broke into a panic-stricken flight. Notwithstanding their natural instinct to remain in a bunch, the frightened animals broke and scattered in every direction. The Kid doubted if the posse would recover more than a handful of their mounts, and then only the poorest. If his friends made good their escape, there would be no further pursuit to bother them.

Satisfied that he had done his work well, the Kid swung the racing horse in the desired direction and aimed it in a line that would bring him to join his companions—assuming that they had managed to break through the State Police without taking lead.

Part Two - The Saga of the Hooded Riders

Nine - I'm Going In Alone

'They're coming down at us,' Wes Hardin reported, moving back to where Dusty and Mark stood alongside the horses. 'Nothing from Lon yet.'

'We'd've heard, happen they'd seen him,' Mark stated.

'I reckon we'd best get ready to go,' Dusty went on. 'Lead them up almost to the top of the slope, Wes. Don't jerk off the covers though.'

Despite the even manner in which he spoke, Dusty knew just how dangerous charging across the river in the face of the posse would be unless the Kid provided some kind of diversion. Since their first meeting on the Brownsville trail, the Kid had never failed Dusty. However, he faced by far his most difficult task that night.

Swinging astride his huge paint stallion, Dusty first checked that the leading ropes of the two spare horses were securely fastened to his saddlehorn. Then he gripped the cords which ran from the horn to the tops of the structures carried by two more of the horses. At Dusty's side, Mark repeated the precautions. Then Wes led the four horses which carried the bizarre loads built during the late afternoon, taking them almost in sight of the river. Dusty and Mark followed, making sure there would be no premature uncovering of the hooded upper parts.

With the horses in position, Wes returned to and mounted the animal he would be using. He noticed that the Kid's white stallion followed the other horses. From what he had seen, the white no more than tolerated even the Kid's close friends and so felt disinclined to take liberties with hackamore and lead rope.

'They're moving quieter than I'd expect,' Mark breathed, standing in his stirrups to watch the dark mass of the posse advancing down the slope.

'Sure are,' Dusty agreed.

Then he gave his attention to the horses ahead of him. None of the four selected to carry the special loads bore an ownership brand. Nor could any of the items on their backs be traced to Mark. Provided his party broke through the State Police without being captured, there was nothing to connect Ole Devil's floating outfit with Wes Hardin's escape.

Dusty knew that to be a consideration of major importance. One thing his uncle had stressed before sending the trio to help Wes had been that they must, as far as possible, avoid open conflict with the State Police. Circumstances had prevented Dusty from carrying out the order, but he intended to lessen the chances of his being tied into the affair. If his part in Wes' escape could be proved, it would cause Ole Devil great embarrassment and might even jeopardize the work already done to bring back a decent, honest, elected government to Texas.

'It'll soon be time to move whether Lon comes through or not,' Mark said, wondering if the covers at the end of the

cords would have put out the lamps they prevented being seen.

Dusty did not reply for a moment, but estimated the distance to the posse. While he felt little respect for the average State Police officer's shooting skill, he did not want to present them with too easy a target.

'Get set!' he ordered, gripping the cords.

'Come on, Lon,' Mark whispered. 'Do something!'

Almost as if the Kid heard, he produced his startling effect. From where they sat their horses, Dusty's party saw little of the rocket being fired—but they could not miss it striking Robbins. Loud in the night rang the stricken man's hideous scream; then he came tumbling down the slope in a mass of flames. Only for a moment did Dusty hesitate. He saw the chance had come, even as the shocking thought that the Kid might be the victim struck him. If that fiery mass should be the Kid, his sacrifice must not be in vain.

'Yeeah!' Dusty yelled, shattering the night with the rebel yell.

'Giddap!' Wes echoed, lashing the nearest of the four specially loaded horses with his reins.

Already restless under the uncomfortable and strange burdens, all four horses leapt forward. Fighting down his fear that the Kid's body rolled blazing on the slope, Mark kicked his mount into movement. As the leading horses passed over the rim, he and Dusty jerked the coverings from the tops of their loads.

At the sound of Robbins' scream, Bilsden's party came to a halt and whirled around. What they saw slammed them into such a state of terrified stupefaction that they could not have been better prepared to receive Dusty's second surprise.

The earlier stages of the posse's advance had been made in commendable silence, although less from discipline than out of a healthy respect for the marksmanship of their proposed victims. On seeing the body making its fiery descent, all thoughts of noiseless movement ended and talk welled up. Even Bilsden forgot his interest in how Salter's mission had gone. He wondered what had caused the rocket to discharge early, but did not attribute it to any human agency.

Loud though the excited Negroes chattered as they stared up the slope, the rebel yell rang out louder. Yet only a couple of them turned to see why the hitherto silent Texans were letting out such a noise. The two men saw the four leading horses burst into sight—and what a sight!

Hideous heads, with fiery, glowing eyes and mouths, topped white, flapping and unreal-seeming bodies a'fork the horses as they charged down the slope towards the river. Wild, unearthly screeches and howls shattered the night above the drumming of hooves. The startled shrieks which arose from the investigating pair served only to bring their companions whirling around the faster.

Despite the fact that his family and kin owned no slaves, and indeed that there were no colored people in Rio Hondo

County, Dusty had seen enough of Negroes to understand something of their mentality. At that time most Negroes in the United States were only two or three generations removed from the raw African bush natives. While they copied many of the white men's ways and mostly practiced Christianity, at the back of their minds remained the inborn beliefs and old tribal superstitions. Even the more enlightened colored men, especially those who sought to lead their people, clung to the old beliefs; although in most cases they used the primitive religions as a means of enforcing their will on the less educated folk.

So Dusty based his plan on those superstitions. While he hoped for no more than a temporary shock, giving time to break through unharmed, he saw that the explosion of the rocket handed him far more than that.

Maybe Bilsden recognized the glowing heads as nothing more than hollowed-out melons, with lanterns of some kind illuminating the features cut through the skin. None of his companions gave the matter a thought. Taken with the sight of the blazing body, those unearthly 'riders' charging across the river proved too much for the majority of the Negroes. Yells of fear rang out and the men scattered, dropping weapons and spoiling the aim of the few hardier, or more drunken, souls who stood their ground. Some shots were fired, without any result other than to puncture holes in the sheets Mark had been taking as a wedding present for his cousin and which, draped over the pole supports lashed to

the horses' backs, formed the bodies of Dusty's phantom 'riders'.

On the heels of the four horses, although fanned out to their flanks so as to avoid bullets aimed at the 'riders', Dusty, Mark and Wes plunged their mounts through the Sulphur and kept up their wild yelling. Although hampered by the two led horses, Dusty and Mark found no great difficulty in making a fast crossing. In the ride north, the spare animals—to form a nucleus of the cousin and her husband's remuda—had learned not to fight against the lead rope and followed without making any fuss.

Although not burdened by leading horses, Wes rode without a saddle. For all that, he kept up with his cousin. On reaching the other side of the river, he urged his horse to a better speed. Already the Negroes were beginning to scatter in panic, so no more shots came at the Texans. Wanting to repay his cousin and the other two in some small way, Wes urged his mount alongside the nearest of the leading quartet. Then, using the ability gained handling horses and cattle on a round-up, he turned the horse and its 'rider' along the trail. Edged over by Wes' mount and the other horse, the remainder of the quartet swung around to head in a downstream direction.

'Stop, damn you!' Bilsden screeched after his departing posse. 'Come back here. It's only—'

And then the flames set off the rest of Robbins' rockets. Hissing, glowing missiles flew in all directions, while flames licked high into the sky as other charges took fire before

the propellant could ignite. Some of the rockets came down the slope, causing an even more rapid scattering of the posse,

Long before Bilsden could hope to even start thinking of gathering his men again, the Texans' horses had faded off into the distance.

Half a mile from their crossing point, Dusty started to slow down his paint and told Wes to halt the leading quartet. With that done, the small Texan looked around him.

'Get those things off them!' he ordered. 'If there're any more posses in the county, that fire back there'll bring them like bears to a honey-tree. We don't want to give them something to find us by.'

'They sure worked up a storm,' Wes answered enthusiastically as he started to obey. Then he saw the way in which his companions sat looking at each other and guessed at their thoughts. 'That couldn't've been Lon got hit by the rocket.'

'I sure as hell hope not,' Dusty answered quietly.

'Ole Lon's maybe not smart on some things, but he's got a whole lot more good sense than to charge straight at that damned launcher even if he saw the feller fixing to use it,' Mark went on, trying to sound convincing. 'Do we wait for him, Dusty?'

For a moment Dusty did not reply. He sat staring off across the range to where the sky still glowed redly. Then he turned back to his friends. By that time Mark and Wes had removed the melon heads from the 'riders' and doused

the lanterns. Yet they could guess at the emotions playing on the small Texan's face. Despite his concern for the Kid's wellbeing, Dusty forced himself to try to speak normally,

'We'll keep moving,' he said and the others caught the undertones of strain in his voice. 'Lon'll find us easy enough.'

If, although none of them put the thought to words, that had not been his body they saw struck by the rocket.

Setting his face grimly, Dusty reached across for the halter rope of the nearest unloaded horse. He added two of the quartet to the pair already fastened to his saddlehorn and Mark took charge of the others. Then they set off at a steady trot along the trail.

With every hundred yards put behind them, they expected the Kid to ride up. An hour went by, then two, three, and he still did not put in the expected appearance. Nor did they see any sign of other posses and at last Dusty gave the order to halt. Mark let out a low sigh of relief and turned in his saddle, ears straining in the hope of hearing hooves following them.

'Take the horses off the trail and we'll make camp until dawn,' Dusty said.

'There's not much chance of him coming now, is there?' Wes asked.

'There's always a chance where ole Lon's concerned,' Mark replied; but his voice lacked conviction.

'You know there's not,' Wes insisted bitterly. 'Damn it to hell, he got killed because of me.'

‘You can drop that right now!’ Dusty snapped. ‘Lon knew what he was taking on. If anything went wrong—’

‘Damn it, Dusty, he’s your *amigo*!’ Wes yelled.

‘You don’t have to tell *us* that,’ Mark put in. ‘And hold your voice down, damn you.’

‘That’s just about what I was going to say!’ Dusty went on.

Suddenly Wes realized just how his companions must feel. While he had known the Kid only a short time, they were the dark youngster’s friends and were bound by the close ties of dangers shared. So he closed his mouth and followed the other two off the trail. After allowing their horses to drink at the river, they recrossed the trail and found a place to camp for the remainder of the night. None of them spoke much as they removed saddles or packs from the horses, yet the same thought ran through all their minds. While none of them could wholly believe it, they hoped that the Kid might still be alive.

An explosive snort broke from the Kid’s stallion as it stood clear of the other animals. Hearing the sound, Dusty and Mark swung around and stared at the big horse. They knew that the white had been taught to remain silent in camp and did not ordinarily make a sound. Tossing back its fine head, the stallion let out another snort.

Hooves drummed and a familiar shape drew nearer the camp through the darkness.

‘Lon!’ Mark whooped.

‘Howdy,’ greeted the Kid, riding up and halting his borrowed horse. ‘You was expecting maybe ole Carpetbag

Davis hisself?’

At first Wes could bring no words out, but stood with his mouth opening and closing soundlessly. Then he sprang forward with his right hand held out.

‘You danged ole goat!’ he gurgled. ‘We thought you’d gone and got all burned up by that rocket.’

‘That was another feller,’ answered the Kid, shaking hands. Then he waved his other hand in the direction of the horse which had brought him to the camp. ‘I figured you might need this.’

At first Wes thought the Kid meant the horse. Then he moved closer and ran his hand over the saddle. No cowhand could fail to identify such an important item of property by touch.

‘Well I’ll be eternally damned!’ Wes gasped. ‘It’s my kak.’

‘How about telling us what happened?’ demanded Mark, clamping hold of the Kid’s hand and pumping it vigorously.

‘Ease off!’ yelped the recipient of the handshake. ‘Get your cotton-picking fist offen my dainty lil paw afore you crush it away.’ Then he realized how his friends must have been feeling. ‘Hey you-all weren’t worried about me, now were you?’

‘Damned Injun!’ snorted Mark, thrusting the hand away, ‘I thought you’d took my makings with you.’

‘What happened, Lon?’ asked Dusty, grinning. ‘Who got hit with the rocket?’

‘Feller who owned it,’ answered the Kid. ‘He was happied up about burning you out, so I figured he should ought to

try it hisself.'

'What kept you for so long?' Mark said.

'I got to thinking that Wes'd likely need his saddle and went back for it,' the Kid replied.

Which bald statement the others had to be content with. The Kid did not bother telling them how he had swung around, returned to the State Police camp and stolen the rope from a saddle. Nor how he had staked out the borrowed horse on good grazing, then slipped unseen along the trail to remove the saddle from the dead bay. That part had been comparatively easy, with the posse returned to their camp and not watching the river. However, it had taken time, during which his companions continued to ride and worried over the possibility that he might be dead.

'I just never reckoned that you'd go to worrying over poor lil ole me,' he concluded with a grin.

'Get dressed, you're giving me the shivers,' growled Dusty.

'Danged Injun!' snorted Mark, a comment only a good friend could make to the Kid with the hope of remaining healthy after using it. 'What now, Dusty?'

'We'll do like we intended. Bed down here for the night. I don't reckon they'll be following us, but we'll not light a fire, just in case there's more of them about.'

Not until the camp had been established and the Kid had returned to wearing civilized clothing did the question of the future arise. Wes brought it up, wondering what his illustrious cousin might be planning to do next. Attending

the wedding of Mark's cousin might be given as a reason for their presence in the area, but he knew the more pressing business of his troubles had really brought them to North Texas.

'What're we going to do now, Dusty?' he asked.

'Get some sleep while we can,' Dusty answered with a grin.

'And then what?' Wes insisted.

'Comes the morning you're heading south for the OD Connected. If you steer clear of towns, you ought to make it.'

'Will you be coming along?'

'Nope. I'm going up to Bonham after we've seen Mark's kin, to see if I can find anybody who'll help clear you of killing Sheriff Waggets.'

Which Wes had expected to hear. Knowing the dangers involved in such an undertaking, he felt that he could make a better contribution than the one Dusty had outlined.

'Then I'm coming along,' he stated.

'The hell you are!' Dusty snapped.

'You're sticking out your neck for me—' Wes interrupted before Dusty could go further.

'Which same we don't want things made any harder,' Mark put in.

'How's that?' Wes demanded hotly.

'You're a mite too well known up that ways,' the blond giant explained. 'It only needs one glimpse of you

thereabouts and the whole country'll be filled with State Police thicker'n fleas on an Injun cur dog.'

'Proving you didn't burn down that sheriff's going to be hard enough without that,' drawled the Kid. 'Dusty's acting for the best.'

Only for a moment did Wes hesitate. He realized just how much he owed to his three companions. Without their appearance he would have ridden into the second posse, or been boxed between the two groups. Caught unprepared he would be dead, or captured; which amounted to the same thing. Even had he managed to hole up across the Sulphur, it was unlikely he could have escaped. Probably the first rush would have seen him over-run, or the rockets would have burned him out. At best he might have climbed the bluffs and faced the chancy business of making his escape on foot.

The presence of Dusty's party had changed all that. Careful planning of the escape by Dusty, aided by Mark's wedding gifts and the Kid's specialized talents, had brought Wes through unharmed. The very least he could do in return was avoid adding to his cousin's already difficult task of proving him innocent.

'All right, Dusty,' he said, 'you know best.'

'I figure I do,' Dusty admitted.

'You don't have to tell *us* that,' stated the Kid. 'Now how's about leaving the hired help to get some sleep?'

'Why not?' Dusty replied. 'It's what you pair do best.'

‘One thing though, Dusty,’ Mark said as they prepared to bed down. ‘How’d you figure to handle things in Bonham?’

‘Ride in and ask a few questions as a starter.’

‘Won’t folks recognize you? Lon and me’ve never been up there, but somebody might know you.’

‘I don’t reckon so,’ Dusty answered. ‘I’ve not been there since just after the war and I wore uniform then.’

‘You figuring on asking the local law to tell us what we want to know?’ the Kid inquired.

‘Not the law,’ Dusty replied. ‘And not *us*. When we get there, I’m going in alone.’

‘Alone?’ three voices raised in one single word, matching each other in the incredulity they showed.

‘Just me,’ Dusty agreed. ‘It’s the only way we can do it.’

Ten - Mount Up and Ride Out

Only after a heated discussion did Dusty's companions agree to fall in with his arrangements. At first all insisted that they should accompany him to Bonham and give their moral backing to the investigation. However, Dusty's arguments won out in the end. Wes finally realized that his presence would be a liability in Fannin County, more so than his local knowledge might prove an asset. Knowing the delicate nature of the situation, Mark and the Kid saw reason more readily. When they heard how Dusty planned to make his visit, it was apparent that he stood a better chance of succeeding alone.

So the party separated at dawn, with Wes riding south and the others headed towards the home of Mark's cousin. Long before any of the State Police posse managed to reach Delta and spread the alarm, Wes passed through the danger area and headed towards the OD Connected in comparative safety. On their way north, Dusty's party avoided contact with other people until reaching their first destination. There they left the depleted wedding gifts and made preparations for the final and most difficult part of their business.

Again the trio travelled, keeping clear of towns. Later they would learn that the precaution had been unfounded. Although Bilsden knew that three men had helped Wes

escape, he could not offer any description of them. Nor could any of the Negroes who had ridden on the two posses.

Leaving his friends in the woods behind the Hardin place, Dusty rode into Bonham, as he planned, alone. Aware that he took a considerable risk, he did all he could to lessen the chances of being recognized. Instead of riding the paint, a fine animal guaranteed to attract attention, he sat a nondescript bay gelding borrowed from Mark's cousin. While it was an unprepossessing beast, it had a remarkable turn of speed and proved to be both steady and reliable.

A group of men pitching horseshoes behind the livery barn watched Dusty ride up with no great interest. He had left off his gunbelt and matched Colts, although retaining his usual clothes. Thrust into his waistband, butt pointing to the front and on his left side, was a spare Army Colt from his warbag. With plain walnut grips, the gun looked like an ordinary production model. Closer examination might disclose that its mechanism had been smoothed and improved to professional standard but nothing showed externally. All in all Dusty struck the men as he wanted to, looking like an insignificant drifter. If they thought about him at all, it was as an unimportant cowhand come into town for a between pay-day visit.

Normally the owner of a livery barn could be counted on as a source of information and gossip. Newcomers would be pumped for news and local gossip handed out in return. While that began to happen in Bonham, the first mention of

the burned-out Hardin cabin brought an immediate change. Across the barn, a tall, gangling loafer spat a straw from his mouth and straightened up. At the same moment the owner recalled some pressing business to which he must give his attention. Taking the hint, Dusty left his horse in a stall, hung his saddle on the inverted V-shaped wooden burro and walked from the building.

Failing to gather any information at one source, Dusty headed towards what ought to offer his next best chance. Barbers as a whole were not noted for taciturn natures and he hoped to learn something while having his hair cut. While walking along the street, he saw the gangling jasper following. At first he thought nothing of the matter, but his suspicions rose when the other slouched into the barber's shop and flopped into one of the chairs supplied for customers awaiting attention.

As at the barn, the barber started talking cheerily enough. Then he clamped shut his mouth when Dusty spoke of seeing the Hardin place. Coming to his feet, the gangling man remarked that he would have to come back later and walked from the room. Darting a glance after the departing shape, the barber leaned closer to Dusty.

'You want some good advice, friend?' he asked in a low, urgent voice.

'A man can always use that,' Dusty admitted.

'Then don't start asking questions about that place you saw. It's likely to get plumb unlucky.'

'How come?'

‘You’re not taking my advice.’

‘I never said I would,’ Dusty pointed out, but let the subject drop.

With the haircut finished and paid for, the barber whisked away his cloth and flicked at Dusty’s shoulders with a clothes-brush.

‘I don’t reckon you’ll take any notice, cowboy,’ he said. ‘But a smart feller’d mount up and ride out right now.’

‘I’ve only just come in,’ Dusty drawled, setting on his hat at a jaunty angle. ‘It wouldn’t be polite-like to ride off out without spending some money.’

So the second possible source failed to pan out. Not entirely. It gave Dusty added proof that pressures had been brought to bear on the citizens of Bonham, causing reluctance to discuss any part of the Hardin family’s affairs. A more prudent man would have collected his horse and ridden out of town, to return with the Kid and Mark at his back. Although Dusty did not lack prudence, he felt he could make one more effort before leaving.

The time being shortly before sundown, the Pronghorn Saloon had only a few customers scattered around its barroom. Behind the counter, a plump, red-faced man moodily wiped over some glasses with a cloth that had seen better days. He watched the small Texan walk up, dropped the cloth and waited expectantly.

‘Howdy,’ Dusty greeted. ‘I’ll have a beer and take something yourself.’

‘Thanks,’ the bartender replied, eyeing the roll of money Dusty took out with interest. ‘You’re new hereabouts.’

‘Just passing through on the way home from a trail drive.’

That news, taken with the money, made the small visitor worth cultivating. No subject equaled the cattle industry as a talking point in Texas. Everybody in the State felt an interest in it and wanted to know the latest developments or news. After pouring out drinks, the bartender opened up with a question about the success of Dusty’s drive. For a time they talked cattle, with uncomplimentary references to the type of peace officers found in trail end towns. Then Dusty tried to introduce the matter which had brought him to town.

‘I hear tell this here’s a place where things happen.’

‘How’d you mean?’ countered the bartender, darting a glance at the four men who came through the batwing doors.

‘Like how this’s the place where Wes Hardin hailed from,’ Dusty answered, also studying the newcomers.

‘Weather’s been pretty fair for trailing cattle,’ said the bartender in a noncommittal tone.

If Dusty required any further proof of a conspiracy of silence, the words supplied it. Normally a citizen of Wes’ prominence would have been eagerly discussed by the bartender. That he would not talk about him struck Dusty as highly significant. So did the fact that he flicked another look at the new arrivals and moved along the bar to resume his glass polishing.

'Is it true that the State Police fixed it so Wes took the blame for one of their men shooting the sheriff?' Dusty asked in a loud voice, keeping the quartet under observation in the bar's mirror.

A shocked silence fell on the room as his words carried around it. Only three of the four men advanced towards the bar and they exchanged glances. The other man was the lean jasper from the livery barn and he remained leaning against the rear wall.

Each of the three men approaching Dusty wore a deputy sheriff's badge and looked a rough handful. Baker, heavily-mustached, bulky, wearing range clothes and low hanging Remington Navy revolvers, and Sturgis, a taller, leaner man with a taste for gambler-style dress, had come with Spargo on his arrival. To help maintain a dignified silence on the matter of Bill Waggets' death, the new sheriff brought in Tod Ritson, the third member of the party. Tall, well built, flashily handsome, he sported a town suit, derby hat but wore an Adams revolver in an open-topped holster on a western pattern belt. Taken all in all, they made a dangerous trio but dispensed an indifferent brand of law enforcement.

'What was that you said, boy?' demanded Baker, halting at Dusty's right side while the other two completed a triangle of bodies around the small Texan.

Turning as if aware for the first time of the deputies' presence, Dusty faced the speaker. By all appearances, he

imagined Baker to be alone or discounted the other two. Which was just what he wanted them to think.

‘I was just saying something I heard on the trail,’ Dusty replied,

‘Well ask it again, boy,’ Baker growled. ‘I’m a mite hard of hearing.’

‘I said that I’d heard Wes Hardin didn’t kill the sheriff, but that the State Police blamed him for it because one of their men did.’

A silence that could almost be felt followed Dusty’s words. Every customer in the room knew the main task of Spargo’s deputies was to prevent such comments being made. So the citizens of Bonham waited and watched, wondering what would happen to the rash visitor.

And very rash Dusty appeared to be. Every one of the deputies stood taller and out-weighed him by many pounds. It seemed that nothing—for no citizen felt inclined to intervene—could save the small Texan from a brutal beating. Baker’s companions clearly thought so and showed no precautions as they prepared to hand the beating out. If Sturgis edged closer to Dusty’s back while the other looked at Baker, it was merely to take a more rapid part in the proceedings.

In a way Sturgis had his wish granted. Confident of success, the man failed to stay alert. To do that just sat back and begged for bad and painful trouble when dealing with Dusty Fog.

In exculpation it must be said that none of the trio recognized their victim as Dusty Fog. Even with such information, they could hardly be expected to have heard of the peculiar talents of Ole Devil Hardin's valet. Many Occidental people thought Tommy Okasi was Chinese when, in fact, he hailed from Japan. He brought with him a knowledge of strange Oriental unarmed fighting and had passed on the secrets of *ju-jitsu* and *karate* to the smallest male member of the Fog, Hardin and Blaze clan. Backed by his surprising physical strength, that knowledge gave Dusty a vast, unexpected edge when dealing with enemies who knew only Occidental methods of brawling.

Darting a glance at the mirror, Dusty decided that the man behind him was close enough to learn better manners. Suddenly, without giving the slightest intimation of his actions, he drove his right elbow back to smash into Sturgis' solar plexus. Although Dusty did not have time to raise his fist to the required ear-level by which the *Ko-Empi*, rear elbow, blow of *karate* gained its full power, he found no cause for complaint. Driving slightly upwards into Sturgis' middle, the hard bone of Dusty's elbow arrived with disconcerting force. A startled, croaking gasp broke from the man and he staggered away, wondering how the hell a mule had kicked him in the middle of the saloon.

Letting out a surprised yell, Ritson lunged forward. From striking Sturgis, in a continuation of the move, Dusty brought forward and lashed around his hand at Ritson. The way Dusty hit him looked strange to eyes used only to

western-world fist-fighters, yet proved very effective. Instead of ramming the front of his fist into Ritson's face, he whipped it up and drove the protruding knob of the second knuckle so that it caught the man's nose. Again Dusty could not gather the full power behind the blow, but the *uraken*, back fist, left little to be desired. Nose spouting blood and pain almost blinding him, Ritson's lunge altered direction and he shot off at a tangent with hands clawing at his face.

At which point the realization that all was going wrong sank into Baker's head. He could hardly believe his eyes as he saw the small 'victim' suddenly turn into a high-effective aggressor. As Ritson staggered away, Baker jerked mobility into frozen limbs and launched a punch at Dusty's head. Going under the blow, Dusty demonstrated that he could also fight in the conventional manner. Hooking his right fist savagely, if a mite low, into Baker's middle he caused the man to draw back and fold over. Following on the heels of the first blow, Dusty's left hand collided with offered jaw and lifted Baker erect.

Before Dusty could send the third blow at Baker, he felt a hand close on his shoulder and swing him around. While partially winded, Sturgis could still handle himself well enough to be dangerous. Swinging Dusty around, he drove a fist at his head. Showing the reflexes that allowed him to draw a gun at blinding speed, Dusty threw up his left arm and blocked the attack. Swinging back his right elbow, he propelled it forward at Sturgis. Again he did not use conventional methods, but struck with the *tegatana*, the

hand-sword. Fingers close together and extended, rammed into Sturgis' already tender solar plexus and his forward impetus added to the result. Feeling as if somebody had rammed a blunt spear into his body, Sturgis doubled over and fell back once more.

Figuring the time had come to leave, Dusty headed on the run towards the batwing doors. Letting out a yell which sounded three parts fear, the gangling man thrust himself forward and reached for his gun. While he saw the man was no gunfighter, Dusty took no chances. Bounding into the air, he brought off a *Mae Tobi Geri* forward jump kick. Caught in the center of the forehead by Dusty's boot heel, the man slammed back into the wall, hung there for a moment and slid down with his gun still not clear of leather.

Landing back on the floor from the kick, Dusty hurled himself through the doors. Too late he saw two people walking by and they showed no greater awareness. Before he could stop himself, he crashed into the nearer, a tall young U.S. Cavalry captain. The impact bounced them both backwards, Dusty colliding with the saloon's wall and the captain catching his balance before hitting the young woman at his side. Even as Dusty prepared to dive by the officer, his eyes went to the girl and he hesitated in his actions.

A dainty Eastern hat perched attractively on smartly coiffured rusty-red hair. The beautiful face showed intelligence, though it was slightly marred by a studied air of condescending superiority. For a moment the latter

emotion wiped off as she stared at the small Texan, but returned quickly enough. Slim, though far from skinny, her stylish Eastern travelling suit set off her figure. A vanity bag hanging from her left wrist and a parasol across her right shoulder completed the picture of an elegant, wealthy young lady taking a stroll with a presentable gentleman of the U.S. Cavalry.

To give him his due, the captain recovered fast from the collision. Rage twisted his face as he lunged forward. Knotting his gauntleted right hand, he drove it solidly around to crash against the side of Dusty's jaw. Taken by surprise, Dusty slammed back into the wall and slid dazed to the sidewalk. Then the captain swung towards his companion.

'I'm sorry, Miss Montoon,' he began. 'But—'

Before he could say more in his explanation, the batwing doors again flung open. Gun in hand, face wild with fury, Baker burst into sight. He skidded to a halt, looked down at Dusty and moved forward, drawing back his foot for a kick.

'Don't you dare do that!' shouted the young woman in a clipped New England accent. 'Stop him, Captain Grare.'

Although a hint of reluctance crossed the captain's features, he stepped forward. 'Cut it out, deputy!' he snapped. 'Miss Montoon doesn't approve of violence by peace officers.'

Baker's foot quivered in mid-air then sank to the sidewalk again. Bending down, he jerked the Colt from Dusty's waistband. Then he turned to the girl and removed his hat.

‘This bas—jasper jumped a feller in the saloon and run out. I figured to arrest him, ma’am.’

‘So I saw,’ the girl answered dryly. ‘Do you usually kick a man who is on the ground?’

‘I never ki—!’ Baker began.

‘While I am out here as my father’s representative investigating allegations of malpractice by peace officers, I have no desire to interfere with the normal working of your office,’ Miss Montoon announced pompously. ‘By all means arrest the man, but don’t try to practice your vindictive violence on him.’

Sturgis and Ritson charged out of the saloon. Any intentions they might have felt of practising vindictive violence on seeing Dusty sprawled before them ended rapidly.

‘Get him on his feet and haul him to jail!’ ordered Baker.

‘I’ll do that all ri—!’ Ritson started, speaking thickly due to the swollen state of his nose.

‘And do it easy!’ Baker snapped. ‘This here’s Miss Montoon.’

‘I’ve no doubt you’ve heard of me,’ the girl purred.

‘We sure have, ma’am,’ agreed Sturgis, trying to sound as if having heard filled him with pleasure. ‘What do we do about this here miscreant, Tod?’

‘Better take him to the pokey to cool for the night and turn him loose in the morning,’ Baker answered, glancing at the girl.

'I know you won't mind if I come over and look at your jail,' Miss Montoon remarked.

'When, ma'am?' Baker growled.

'Either sometime tonight, or early tomorrow morning.'

'Come any time, ma'am,' Baker offered, sounding a touch bitter as he saw his chances of revenge on the small Texan departing.

Annoyance and dislike showed on three faces, although they tried to conceal it from the girl. Ever since hearing that Miss Eliza Montoon planned a tour of Texas, including the visit to Bonham, Sheriff Spargo had repeatedly warned his deputies how they must act in her presence. Daughter of a prominent Eastern Radical Republican newspaper owner, she possessed power not usually found in a young woman of the day. Well-educated, her name ranked high among the liberal-intellectuals back East. Like most of her kind, she felt disturbed about the conditions around her. In her desire to revolt against what she regarded as the mismanagement of society, she had developed a stupid admiration for criminals, regarding them as being at war with the conditions of which she disapproved; Just as stupidly she had come to regard the law enforcement officers as enemies rather than guardians of life and property.

So, receiving word of her visit, Spargo guessed what kind of 'investigation' she planned to carry out on behalf of her father's newspaper. It would, unless he missed his guess, be a deliberate attempt to blacken the reputation of every

peace officer who crossed her path. While not over-worried about how the local citizens regarded him, Spargo wanted to create a good impression with a young woman in a position to further his political ambitions. With that thought in mind, he continually warned his men to watch their behavior in her presence.

Much as they wanted to repay their injuries at Dusty's hands, none of the trio saw a chance of doing it with the girl in town. Hauling the small Texan to his feet, Sturgis and Ritson started to half-carry, half-drag him across the street in the direction of the sheriff's office.

Still dazed, Dusty could think well enough to know better than make an attempt at escaping. Enough of the conversation had sunk into his fuddled mind for him to know he would not be mishandled—at least as long as the girl remained in town. However, if he tried to escape, the trio of deputies would be presented with a good excuse to treat him very rough.

Hauling Dusty into the office, the two deputies glared at their leader in Sheriff Spargo's absence.

'Let's hand him his needings, Tod,' suggested Ritson.

'Not while she's in town,' Baker answered, ramming the muzzle of his revolver hard into the base of Dusty's spine. 'But when she's gone, toss him into a cell and leave him to cool off.'

'Boy!' Sturgis growled in Dusty's ear as Baker dropped the Army Colt into the desk's drawer. 'You're sure lucky. If

that lousy soft-shelled liberadical [ix](#) whore wasn't in town,
we'd tromp you, but good.'

With that the men heaved Dusty into the center of the
three cells, slammed and locked its door.

Eleven - Southrons Hear Your Country Call You

After locking Dusty in the cell, Baker and the other two deputies went into the office. As they left the door open, he could hear their comments on Miss Montoon's presence in town and figured himself lucky for it. There did not appear to be any chance of escaping, so he settled down in the novel position of being a prisoner. Later the chance might arise and if it came he wanted to be ready for it. Ruefully he touched his jaw and winced. That Yankee captain threw a good punch. However, he had recovered from its effects and felt able to do whatever might be necessary to escape.

Time went by and night arrived without Dusty seeing any way of breaking out. At no time did any of his captors enter the rear of the building or show that they remembered him. The door to the office remained open all the time, preventing any attempted tampering with the cell's lock. First Ritson left the office, presumably to eat. Then, at around nine o'clock, the deputy returned and his companions departed. Sitting at the desk with his back to the cell doors, Ritson produced a bottle of whiskey from a drawer. After putting up his feet, he started to read a newspaper and took pulls at the bottle at intervals.

Dusty knew that he would probably not see a better chance to escape, but knew doing so needed some planning. Settling down on the hard wooden bunk, he gave thought to the matter.

Before any idea suggested itself, Dusty heard somebody outside the building softly whistling a familiar tune. Rising, he darted a glance at the office and, satisfied that Ritson had not heard, stood on the bunk. The window proved too high for him to look out and see the whistler.

‘Southrons hear your country call you,’ whispered a woman’s voice, giving the first line of the tune whistled to attract his attention.

During the War Dusty had twice worked with a prominent member of the Confederate States’ Secret Service, learning a password much used to identify one agent to another. He guessed that the speaker wanted to make sure who occupied the cell and prepared to speak the second line of the highly patriotic words General Samuel Pike had put to Daniel D. Emmet’s immortal ‘Dixie’. That gave the required counter-sign.

‘Up lest worse than death befall you!’

A hand rose into view, gripping an ivory-buffed Dance Brothers copy of the Colt 1851 Navy revolver. Taking the gun, Dusty drew it through the window.

‘How soon?’ asked the voice.

‘As quick as I can,’ he promised.

‘I’ll wait. Need any help?’

‘Let’s see if I can do without it first.’

‘I’ll give you ten minutes, then I’m moving in.’

Dropping back to the floor after listening to the speaker’s last whispered warning, Dusty turned his attention to the front office. Ritson still sat at the desk, clearly unaware that his prisoner had received a visitor. Quickly checking on the Dance’s condition, although he knew it would be ready for use, Dusty prepared to make his move.

‘Hey!’ he yelled. ‘Hey, John Law!’

When Ritson gave no sign of having heard, Dusty looked for a means of attracting his attention. Under the bunk lay a dirty plate left by a previous occupant of the cell. Picking it up, Dusty reached through the bars with it, took aim and skimmed it towards the deputy.

Luck favored the small Texan and the spinning missile struck Ritson on the head as he took a further drink from the almost empty bottle. Whiskey sprayed into the air, the bottle flew from Ritson’s hand, and he raised a bellow of rage. Slamming his feet to the floor, he sent the chair flying and spun around.

‘What the—!’ he began, clawing out his Adams.

‘How about some food?’ Dusty asked, holding the Dance concealed behind his back but ready for use.

‘*Food?*’ Ritson howled. ‘I’ll give you food, your peckerwood bastard!’

‘That’s what I asked for,’ Dusty drawled. ‘Miss Montoon’d not like hearing you town clowns kept me all hungered up.’

For a moment Dusty thought that he had pushed Ritson too far and tensed ready to shoot. Then the man thrust the

Adams back into leather and started to turn away. It seemed that Miss Montoon's name had a cooling effect on his temper.

'Come on, you stinking Yankee son-of-a-bitch!' Dusty shouted. 'Go get some food. Or daren't you step outside in case somebody asks how you got that swelled-up nose?'

Just as Dusty hoped, the remark sank home deep and hurt. Prideful in his appearance, Ritson felt touchy about the injury to his face. While the swelling would go down in time, he knew it looked unsightly and served as a reminder that he could be rough-handled. That such an insignificant runt had handed him the injury made the feeling far worse. Never too amiable-natured, the comment roused Ritson to a pitch of fury where he knew he must do something. Yet he remembered Spargo's orders and hesitated.

'You fetch me something to eat and I promise not to lick you when you bring it in here,' Dusty went on. 'Happen you meet a mean, one-armed, one-legged Digger Injun midget on the way, scream for your two *amigos*. The three of you together ought to be able to handle him happen he don't try too hard.'

'I'll try on you!' Ritson yelled and flung himself across the office out of Dusty's sight.

On reappearing, Ritson carried a wicked-looking club collected from the wall rack. With the weapon gripped in his right hand, he charged to the cell door. Mouthing curses and threats, he turned the key in the lock. Dusty fell back against the wall, putting on a scared expression so as to

encourage Ritson into rashness. Success attended his efforts for the deputy hurled open the door and entered.

Up swung the club, ready to descend with shattering force. In his anger Ritson clean forgot the deadly speed his intended victim had shown on their first encounter. Dusty weaved aside, gliding forward and ramming the barrel of the Dance savagely into Ritson's belly. Lashing forward, the club struck the wall. Agony doubled Ritson over to take the back of Dusty's Dance-loaded fist in the face. Lifted erect, the deputy stood for a brief moment dazed and unable to move. Again Dusty swung his right hand, smashing the base of the revolver's butt on to the point of Ritson's jaw. The blow pitched the man sideways into the wall, then he slid down to the floor.

'You didn't try half hard enough,' Dusty remarked as he hauled the unconscious deputy on to the bed and covered him with the dirty flour-sack blanketing supplied for use by the prisoners.

After locking the cell door and pocketing the key, Dusty went to the adjoining door. He saw no sign of movement outside the front of the office but wasted no time. Collecting his Army Colt from the desk drawer, he crossed to the side door and opened it. To warn his helper that he was coming out, he whistled a few bars of 'Dixie'. Then he stepped into the side alley and closed the door.

A slender shape moved from the shadows at the rear end of the building. No longer did the elegant rusty-red locks frame the beautiful face, having in some way been replaced

by almost boyishly-short black hair. Instead of the fashionable Eastern travelling suit, she wore a black shirt and riding breeches tucked into calf-high boots; an outfit which did even more to show off the feminine curves nature had endowed her with. Yet it was still the girl known to the deputies as Miss Eliza Montoon.

‘Thanks, Belle,’ Dusty said, holding out the Dance.

‘Land-sakes, Dusty,’ the girl replied, sounding more like a rich Southern belle than a New England intellectual, ‘you nearly scared me white-haired when you burst out of that saloon.’

‘Had I been asked who I expected to run into here, you’d’ve been the last to come to mind,’ Dusty replied, tucking his Colt into his belt while the girl took possession of her Dance.

‘I have to see you urgently, Dusty,’ the girl stated, her voice taking on a more sober note. ‘But not right now. Captain Grare thinks I’m snuggled down safe in my bed, but I’d rather wait until he’s asleep before I stay away too long,’

‘I’ll wait someplace in town if you like.’

‘It’d be better if you left, wouldn’t it?’

‘Maybe. I don’t reckon they’ll go to the trouble of setting a posse after me if they find my horse’s gone.’

‘Is there a place close by where we could meet soon after midnight?’ asked the girl.

‘Sure. Go out along the westbound trail for about a mile. I’ll be waiting in the woods,’ Dusty replied. ‘Can you do that?’

‘Yes. Give me until just before daylight. If I’m not there by then, I’ll come tomorrow night. Can you stay on for me?’

‘If it’s important,’ Dusty answered.

‘It’s important,’ Miss ‘Montoon’ assured him.

‘Then I’ll be there,’ Dusty promised. ‘How about you?’

‘I’ll get back into the hotel the same way I came out, down the fire-escape rope from my room’s window. It’s safe enough, I’m at the back of the building.’

While wondering at the urgency of Miss ‘Montoon’s’ request, Dusty knew he must wait for the answer. At any moment his escape might be discovered. If he could leave town before Ritson’s mistake became known, he doubted if there would be any pursuit. So he left the girl, each going by the back streets to their destinations. Wasting no time on pondering at the smallness of the world, he made his way to the livery barn.

Although the owner looked out of his office, he withdrew again on recognizing his caller. Nobody else appeared as Dusty quickly saddled the bay and he led it out of the building’s side entrance without attracting attention. Just as he rode out of town, Dusty heard Ritson yelling. A grin came to the small Texan’s face as he urged the bay off across the range. By the time any pursuit might be organized, he would have a good head start and tracking in the dark was impossible.

While making a looping swing designed to bring him back on to the west-bound trail, Dusty wondered again at Miss ‘Montoon’s’ presence in town. That she had chanced

coming to his rescue did not surprise him, but he felt curious to learn the reason why she had asked to see him again.

Still unable to form any conclusion, he rode along the trail through the woodland surrounding the remains of his uncle's home. Then he heard the mournful cry of the whippoorwill repeated twice.

'Lon?' he said.

'If it's anybody else, he's wearing my clothes,' answered the Kid's voice and he walked from among the trees. 'Mark was getting worried about you. Allowed you'd done got into trouble and that we ought to come in and ask some questions about it.'

'Did, huh?' Dusty said.

'Sure. But I said to him straight, "Mark", I said, "you-all know what Dusty told us. Let's us just do like he said".'

'That's what *you* told him?'

'As true as I'm sat here fishing for snapping-turtles in the river.'

'Catch many?' Dusty asked dryly.

'What happened, anyways?' said the Kid, ignoring the question. 'We expected you back earlier.'

'Not much. So you figured on coming in to rescue me, huh?'

'Mark figured we should,' corrected the Kid doggedly. 'Now me, I said—'

'I didn't believe you the first time,' interrupted Dusty.

'Anyways, we'd got help should we need it,' drawled the Kid.

'How come?'

'Met up with Stone Hart and the Wedge on the trail. They were on their way into Bonham, but we asked them to stay out until you got back. They're with Mark back there a piece.'

Dusty approved of his companions' actions. Once again Mark and the Kid had shown themselves capable of serious thought. They knew that one of the Wedge crew might let slip Dusty's identity and ruin all his efforts at remaining anonymous. So they had put the facts plainly to the outfit's boss and Stone Hart cooperated.

'Let's go see them and say "Thanks",' Dusty suggested. 'Are they all on hand?'

'All the regular crew,' the Kid agreed, leading the way off the trail.

With skill gained during years of Indian-country life, the Wedge crew and Dusty's *amigos* had set up a comfortable but well-concealed camp out of sight of the trail. While attending to his horse, Dusty looked at the men gathered around the fire and recognized them all. During the time a year before when he had run the law in a wild Montana gold camp, ^x Dusty had come to know the Wedge crew pretty well and had cause to be thankful to at least two of its members. They were contract trail-drivers, running cattle to the Kansas railheads for smaller ranches which lacked capital or large enough herds to make the trip as

individuals. Skilled at their work, capable and loyal, the men before Dusty formed a group as tough and handy as any in Texas, up to and including the OD Connected hands.

‘Maybe you’d best go watch the trail for a piece, Lon,’ Dusty remarked, before moving towards the fire. ‘Could be folks’ll come looking and it’d be best they didn’t find me.’

‘I’ll see to it,’ promised the Kid. ‘These said folks wouldn’t be lawmen, now would they?’

‘Yep,’ drawled Dusty.

‘Don’t you go telling ole Peaceful about them, you’re likely to scare him to peeing his pants.’

With that the Kid faded off into the darkness and Dusty walked towards the fire. Just as the Kid claimed, all the Wedge’s regular crew appeared to be present.

‘Howdy, Stone,’ Dusty greeted, holding his hand out to the tall young man who turned to face him.

A handsome face, marred by a long scar on its left cheek, smiled back at the small Texan. Although dressed in range clothes, Stone Hart had the indefinable air of a leader. He had collected the scar from a Yankee saber during the War and tended to be self-conscious about it around strangers.

‘Hi, Dusty,’ Hart said. ‘What’s doing?’

‘He just stopped us going to town out of meanness,’ put in the handsome, red-haired scout of the outfit, Johnny Raybold.

‘That’s just the kind of thing he’d do,’ agreed the stocky, rusty-headed young man who had been one of Dusty’s deputies in Quiet Town. Rusty Willis had learned plenty

about practical law enforcement at that time and had given good service.

‘Anyways,’ put in Peaceful Gunn, a middle-sized man with a drooping moustache and mournful face that usually bore a worried expression. ‘Happen we’d’ve gone in, there’d’ve been drinking, carousing, maybe fighting even. I figure we’re better off out here.’

Which comment fooled nobody, especially none of the other men around the fire. Tall, lean, middle-aged and whang-leather tough Waggles Harrison, the crew’s *segundo*, let out a disbelieving snort. A snigger broke from Silent Churchman, a man no taller than Dusty yet with a reputation for enormous strength—and belying both of his names at the end of the drive. Nor did the grizzled, elderly cook, known as Chow Willicks, show any concern at Gunn’s outburst. Last of the crew, but by no means the least, stood Doc Leroy. Tall, slim, with a tan-resisting pallor to his face, Doc looked studious and mild. Yet he too was a top hand at all branches of trail herding and real fast with the ivory-handled Army Colt hanging low at his right side, the flap of his jacket stitched back to leave free access to the weapon. Like Rusty Willis, Doc had learned law-enforcement at Dusty’s hands and would put the training to good use in the future as a member of the Arizona Rangers trying to bring law to that troubled land. [xi](#)

Greeting various members of the outfit, Dusty settled on his heels by the fire. In the background stood the Wedge’s chuck wagon and Chow Willicks appeared to have been at

work. Muttering uncomplimentary comments about folk who couldn't show when the grub was on, and a statement that he never figured on feeding half the blasted OD Connected as well as the hungry turkey buzzards his boss misinformedly called hands, the old cook set to work to raise a meal for the new arrival.

'What kept you so long in town, Dusty?' asked Mark.

'I was in jail.'

Some surprise showed and none of the usual ribald comments which usually greeted such an announcement followed Dusty's words. Getting tossed in jail on a visit to town rated as a misfortune that might happen to the average cowhand, but they never imagined it could happen to Dusty Fog.

'And they let you out?' Johnny Raybold finally demanded. 'There's no justice is what I say.'

'They didn't *let* me out,' corrected Dusty. 'I left without asking permission from them.'

'Now they'll be a-hunting you all which ways,' groaned Peaceful Gunn.

'Nope, I played it smart,' Dusty replied. 'I told them I was you.'

'Now that's what I call a mighty slick way of getting out of it,' grinned Rusty Willis. 'The law'll be after ole Peaceful now instead of you.'

'Which same don't surprise me none,' the doleful-looking hand stated. 'I was sure borned to trouble.'

Any stranger studying Peaceful for the first time might have felt sorry for him, or wondered how such a nervous natured man had taken to the dangerous business of trailing cattle. None of the Wedge crew or floating outfit regarded him in that light. The scared attitude and protestations of a peaceable nature were nothing more than a pose. A number of hard-cases had learned the fact to their pains when trying to browbeat or bully him.

Guessing that their boss wanted to talk privately with Dusty, the Wedge hands engaged each other in conversation or did such chores that required their attention. Mark and Stone looked at the small Texan with interest and the blond giant opened the questioning.

‘How come you wound up in the pokey?’

‘Seems like the local law don’t take to folks asking about what happened the day Bill Waggets was killed,’ Dusty replied. ‘They got so insistent about it that I got all carried away and wound up in a cell.’

‘Then they repented, apologized and turned you loose?’ asked Stone.

‘Something like that. Did Mark tell you why we’re up here?’

‘Sure.’

‘I figured the boys had a right to know why I wanted them to stop out here, instead of going into town.’

‘You did right, Mark,’ Dusty confirmed.

‘Did anybody get hurt when you bust out, Dusty?’ Stone said, wanting to know just how deep the water he was

approaching might be.

‘I had to put a deputy to sleep,’ Dusty replied. ‘Not hard enough to do any real damage.’

A point which Ritson, with a broken nose, might have argued upon. However Stone accepted Dusty’s claim. Knowing the small Texan, Stone realized that only the most dire circumstances would have caused him to come into conflict with the law. No intellectual, Stone admitted that much of Texas’ law enforcement could stand plenty of improvement. Most likely the deputy had received no more than his due. Certainly Dusty would not act in such a manner unless driven to it by sheer necessity.

‘What’re you fixing to do now, Stone?’ Mark asked after a brief pause.

‘Stay on here for the night, I reckon. It’s too late for us to head for town now.’

‘Maybe you’d like to come for a stroll with Mark and me later on, Stone,’ Dusty remarked.

While he did not know why Miss ‘Montoon’ might want to see him, Dusty guessed it must be a matter of some importance. From the company she kept and her appearance when she came to his rescue, the girl still followed much the same profession as when they last met. Yet for the life of him Dusty could not imagine who she worked for, or what brought her to Texas in such a guise.

Watching Dusty, Stone guessed that more than a mere request for company had caused the suggestion. No

cowhand walked when he could ride, and it seemed unlikely that Dusty aimed to go far that night.

‘Sure I’ll come along,’ he said.

Twelve - You're the Rebel Spy?

Shortly before midnight the Kid returned with word that nobody, as far as he could tell, had followed Dusty. The Wedge hands already lay in their blankets and showed no more than a casual interest in their boss's departure. All wondered what could be taking Stone and Ole Devil's floating outfit out of camp at that late hour, but felt content to wait until told.

While walking through the darkness with Mark, the Kid and Stone, Dusty wondered if he might be making a mistake inviting the boss of the Wedge along. Although he knew that Stone could be relied upon to show discretion, Dusty was aware also that Miss 'Montoon' followed a profession which placed great emphasis on its secrecy. After balancing the likely issues, Dusty decided they gained more than they lost by having Stone with them. Should the girl's business require more men than the floating outfit, time would not allow him to send for reinforcements to the OD Connected. If Dusty had to call on the Wedge for aid, he felt that their boss ought to know the facts from the beginning.

Since the night of the fire Parson Hardin had lived in and conducted his business from Bonham. While the main house still remained a burned-out shell, the rest of the buildings stood whole but empty. Leading the way towards the barn, Dusty drew open its door and entered. Following on the

small Texan's heels, the Kid sniffed the air like a redbone hound catching the first scent of a raccoon.

'Mind if I ask who we've come to see, Dusty?' Stone said, looking around the darkened interior.

'Me,' replied a voice that most certainly did not belong to Dusty Fog.

'You stand real quiet, ma'am,' complimented the Kid as Mark and Stone sent hands leaping to their guns. 'Happen I hadn't caught a sniff of your perfume, I might've throwed a shot your way.'

Letting the half-drawn weapons slip back into leather, Mark and Stone watched the slender shape rise from one of the stalls then walk towards them. The darkness prevented them from seeing more than a bare outline, but both formed the impression that the girl would prove worth seeing.

'I'm sorry I startled you, gentlemen,' she said. 'But I didn't want to take chances when I heard you coming.'

'I figured we all might as well hear it,' Dusty told her. 'That way'll save time.'

'Certainly,' agreed the girl. 'The way things turned out, I saw a chance to slip away a little earlier than we expected, Dusty. So I came here and waited.'

'Don't I know your voice, ma'am?' asked the Kid.

'I think I know yours,' she answered. 'You're Lon, Sam Ysabel's son.'

'Dog-my-cats, if it's not Miss Boyd,' breathed the Kid.

'Belle Boyd?' Mark said in a slightly louder voice.

‘You’re the Rebel Spy?’ Stone Hart finished, trying to pierce the darkness and see the face of the girl whose name became a legend during the War.

‘I’m Belle Boyd,’ Miss ‘Montoon’ admitted and the men could guess that a smile played on her lips.

The name meant much to all four men, although only two of them had previously met her. Why the talented and beautiful Belle Boyd became a Confederate spy has been told elsewhere. [xii](#) That she did, and made a success of it, was known to all the Texan quartet, and particularly to Dusty, having been on two missions with her, and the Kid after helping her smuggle blockade-run goods across the Rio Grande. [xiii](#)

‘What brings you here, Belle?’ asked Mark, following the introductions.

‘Work,’ she replied.

‘The old kind?’ the Kid wanted to know.

‘Yes—but for the U.S. Government. You maybe know that Pinkerton left the Yankee Secret Service to organize his own outfit at the end of the War?’

‘We’ve heard,’ Dusty admitted.

‘He took along most of the best men with him. The new head of the Secret Service had a house cleaning, which left him mighty short of staff. What with one thing and another, I was at a loose end and jumped in when he offered to take me on.’

A slightly defensive note crept into Belle’s voice towards the end. She wondered how the men might regard her

change of sides, for her work in the War made her a thorn in the flesh of the outfit which now employed her.

‘Likely he needed the best backing him,’ commented the Kid.

‘And he got it,’ Mark went on, wishing that he could see more of the girl.

‘Only that’s not telling us what brings you here,’ Dusty pointed out.

‘You know, of course, there is considerable pressure being exerted to return the franchise to all Texans?’

‘Sure,’ agreed Dusty and his companions gave confirmatory grunts.

‘And that doing so isn’t meeting with unqualified approval from all sides?’

‘That figures.’

‘Word reached my boss that there might be real bad trouble over the issue here in North Texas, so he sent me along to learn all I can about it.’

The U.S. Secret Service dealt mainly with the ever-growing crime of counterfeiting, but also investigated matters concerning the security of the nation. Knowing this, the men waited for the girl to continue.

‘First we’ve been hearing rumors that large numbers of Negroes are being offered farms in every county from Bowie to Childress. Large parties of them are said to be ready to move out here real soon.’

‘There’s not much land open for sale up north here,’ Dusty said. ‘Most of it was taken long before the War.’

‘That’s one of the things worrying my boss,’ Belle replied. ‘So he sent me out here to learn what’s behind it. We picked on my playing Miss Montoon because she’s in Europe right now and has the kind of background to get on with the soft-shells involved.’

‘How much have you learned so far, Belle?’ Stone inquired.

‘Enough to tell me something has to be done—and fast. Unless it is, hundreds of Texans will be driven from their homes and Negroes brought in to take their places.’

‘Why?’ growled the Kid.

‘So that when free elections come along, the soft-shells and their representatives can keep control of North Texas.’

‘I’m only a lil half-smart part-Comanche boy,’ the Kid drawled. ‘You’ll have to put it in smaller words than that for me to understand.’

‘Why has Texas been the first Confederate State to get back on its feet?’ asked Belle. ‘Apart from being fortunate enough to have Texans living in it?’

‘Through the cattle business,’ Dusty told her, smiling at the way she put his friends at their ease.

‘Which operates mainly from Central and South Texas,’ Belle continued. ‘And finds its market in Kansas.’

‘We had noticed *that*,’ Stone assured her.

‘And to reach that market, you have to go through the North Texas counties.’

‘It licks busting through the Staked Plains and dried-out New Mexico country,’ Mark told her.

‘Could you go through that way?’ asked the girl.

‘Not without adding maybe a month and a whole heap of extra troubles on the way,’ replied Dusty. ‘Likely the losses would out-balance the herd prices.’

‘You’re saying that bringing in all them Negroes could stop us coming through, Belle?’ the Kid remarked.

‘Handled the right way they could,’ Belle replied. ‘And do it even after you Texans are returned the franchise. That’s coming fast, believe me. Too many folks are seeing, from the other Southern States, that carpetbaggers, liber radicals and semi-illiterate Negroes make a mighty poor substitute for an elected state government. Texas should be given its franchise by the end of the year.’

‘And all the carpetbagging scum from Davis down’ll be out of office as soon as the votes’re counted,’ Mark stated.

‘In most cases,’ agreed the girl. ‘But how about in the counties with a majority of Negroes—’

‘Who’ll still have the right to vote,’ Dusty interrupted, starting to see what the girl drove at. ‘And if they used it, they’d put in the folks who’d do most good for them.’

‘So what’d that do?’ asked the Kid.

‘Ruin the cattle industry,’ Belle answered before Dusty could speak. ‘Do it by increasing the difficulties in getting the herds to market.’

Following the thought train started by Belle, each of the men could see what she meant. Native Texans, even those who supported the Union during the War, would never allow such treatment of their State’s major industry. But

drive out a large number of white settlers, replace them with Negroes and the picture took on a different, more deadly complexion.

‘They’d block us off from the railheads just like they’d built a ten foot high wall clear across,’ Stone continued. ‘If they could raise enough colored folk to do it.’

‘And they could,’ Belle stated. ‘There are hundreds who fled, or were taken North by the Underground Railroad [xiv](#) ready to come. They found the North didn’t offer them a land flowing with milk-and-honey and’re mighty unsettled. Down South, a whole lot of them are finding there’s more to running a plantation than knowing how to pick a bale of cotton. All the malcontents and enough more will come, for the kind of offers they’re being given and the promises that are made to them, to do it.’

‘And after that head tax tolls on the herds going through, restrictions on where we can travel, constant trouble between the hands and the Negroes up here,’ Dusty guessed. ‘They could come mighty close to ruining the cattle business.’

‘You don’t figure folks’d stand back for that?’ demanded Mark. ‘Every rancher from here to the border’d paint for war.’

‘And play right into the soft-shells’ hands,’ Belle replied. ‘Straight off they’d start to yell, “Look what happens when we give that Southern trash the franchise. They refuse to accept the will of the majority and start right in to abuse the poor colored folk who only want peace.”’

‘The Army’ll be forced to back up the civil authorities.’

‘Not forced, Dusty, eager to. From what I’ve discovered, General Smethurst is one of the plot’s instigators.’

‘Smethurst’s the one who shot up real fast to general running their prisoner-of-war camps, isn’t he?’ Stone put in. ‘Man, he sure hated us. I’ve heard about the way he treated our boys in the War.’

‘Andersonville wasn’t no home from home for the Yankees, Stone,’ Dusty pointed out, meaning the South’s notorious prisoner-of-war camp, not the town.

‘I know. But if we kept them short-fed down there, it was because the blockade put our own folks on short rations. He did it out of ornery meanness.’

‘And he’s in command of the Army up here,’ Belle said.

‘With only one short-strength regiment under him, but enough for what he wants to do.’

‘We’d have ’em out-numbered,’ Mark growled.

‘And the rest of the U.S. Army would be on the march within a week,’ Belle replied. ‘They might not want to, but public opinion back East would force it. The War might easily start again. Do you want to see that, Mark?’

‘No,’ admitted the blond giant. ‘But I don’t want to see all we’ve worked, sweated and some got killed for ruined either.’

‘We’ll fight rather than see that happen,’ Stone concluded.

While Dusty agreed with his male companions, he wanted to learn more about the take-over plot rather than discuss

the future should it succeed. He always believed that early prevention licked any amount of belated cure.

‘How’d they plan to push the folks out?’ he asked.

‘By foreclosing on every place that’s behind with its taxes—which means almost four-fifths of them—and looking for flaws in the leases of the others,’ Belle explained.

‘They can’t get away with it!’ Mark snapped.

‘Yes they can,’ corrected Belle. ‘One of Smethurst’s arguments is that in view of Texas’ return to solvency tax collection should be more rigorously enforced. Things have moved faster than I expected though. The evictions are due to start in Fannin, Grayson and Lamar Counties at the end of the week.’

‘As close as that?’ Dusty breathed.

‘Yes. I came down here to see if there would be any chance of doing something with the help of the local men. When I saw you, Dusty, I decided to wait until after I put the matter into your hands.’

‘What do you figure we can do, Belle?’

‘Harry the eviction parties, prevent them from carrying out their objective until the Federal Government will take action,’ the girl answered. ‘And see that the ranchers have the means to pay off their back taxes.’

‘Where’ll the money come from for that?’ asked the Kid, ever practical.

‘I have it—although I wouldn’t like you asking too much about where it came from. Let’s just say that the Bad Bunch aren’t guilty of *all* they’re being blamed for at the moment.’

Among the numerous outlaw bands allowed to flourish by the State Police's inept law enforcement, the Bad Bunch had grown to rapid fame. By never leaving a living witness to identify its members, the gang remained unknown and unrecognized. In the near future the floating outfit and Belle Boyd would find themselves taking an active interest in locating and destroying the Bad Bunch. [xv](#)

Although Dusty could guess how Belle had obtained the money, he refrained from doing so. Having seen examples of liberal-intellectual bigotry, he felt sure she called the play correctly. Already there had been incidents where corrupt officials had used their powers to take over choice pieces of property on flimsy excuses. So the seizure of the places in the North Texas counties might be overlooked as following the same general trend; unless one knew the true facts.

'The money's safe for them to use?' asked the Kid.

'It can't be traced back,' Belle assured him. 'All I want you boys to do is make sure it gets distributed to the right places and be on hand to see that the State Police accept it.'

'That won't be easy,' Dusty commented.

'Which's why I'm asking *you* to do it,' Belle replied. 'I don't want some bull-headed local citizen going there all painted for war.'

'Only if you do it, Dusty, there's always a big chance that you'll be recognized,' Mark warned. 'You know what Ole Devil said about not doing anything that might compromise his party. Happen they know it's you behind it, the soft-shells'll lay the whole blame on him.'

'If they recognize you,' Belle agreed. 'Have you heard about the Ku Klux Klan?'

'Sure, over Alabama way,' Dusty agreed. 'A regular secret society, hoods, passwords and all, from what I hear.'

'They only play it that way because their families would suffer if their identities became known,' Belle pointed out, having caught the faintly ironic note in Dusty's voice. 'If you could do something like that—'

'I don't go a whole heap on hiding my face when I'm doing something,' Mark growled.

Despite feeling inclined to agree with his big *amigo*, Dusty knew the situation called for desperate measures. Much of the work would, through necessity rather than racial discrimination, be directed against the Negro element of the State Police. They, the dupes of the carpetbaggers, were sure to form the bulk of the eviction parties. Having recently experienced how well an aura of the supernatural worked against the Negroes, he decided to forget his aversion to going masked and also to play extensively on the primitive fears of his opponents.

'All right, Belle,' he said. 'We'll do it. Lon, Mark and me, that is.'

'And you can count on the Wedge,' Stone continued. 'Which's why you asked me along, I reckon.'

'Most of your outfit'll look better wearing hoods,' commented the Kid.

'Try ignoring him and he'll likely go back to sleep, Stone,' Mark said.

‘Do any of your boys know this neck of the woods, Stone?’
Dusty asked.

‘Peaceful and Johnny hailed from around these parts.’

‘Likely they’ll be able to go from place to place then,’
Dusty said. ‘We’ll have to think about laying hands on the
money, Belle.’

‘And how to try to stop folks painting for war when they
hear what’s happening,’ Mark went on.

‘I reckon I know a way to do that,’ Dusty told him.

Thirteen - Take the Money and Stay Alive

With Stone Hart riding alongside, Chow Willicks drove his chuck wagon into Bonham shortly before noon on the morning following the midnight discussion. Neither wagon nor horses carried any mark to show the outfit owning them and the two men attracted little attention as they halted before Parson Hardin's small establishment. Leaving Chow with the wagon, Stone entered the shop. On coming out a short time later, he was accompanied by Hardin. The old man spoke up for the benefit of a couple of loafers hovering close at hand.

'I can't see why you couldn't fetch the stuff inside.'

'Happen you didn't want 'em, we'd've had all the work for nothing,' Stone replied, leading the way to the rear of the wagon and hauling open its covers.

Climbing in, Hardin nodded a greeting to Dusty who sat behind the storage boxes firmly fastened to the bed of the wagon. Then the old man listened as his nephew told of Belle's discovery, without divulging the source of his information. A grim expression creased the lined face, showing that Hardin understood the full implications of what he heard.

'I'll see that the word's passed around, Dustine,' he promised. 'Likely there'll be a few hot-heads who won't want to go along, but I'll do what I can to keep them in check.'

'Uncle Devil's not to be brought into it,' Dusty warned.

'He won't be,' Hardin promised.

'We'll do everything we can,' Dusty stated.

'That goes without saying, boy. Good luck to you,' Hardin replied. 'I can't say I cotton on to this idea of wearing hoods, but it's the only way.'

'Sure.'

'You can make them all right?'

'If you can get us what we need to do it.'

'There's nothing hard about that,' Hardin assured him. 'I'll have all you want at my place comes nightfall. Say, you sure rough-handled Spargo's boys.'

'Are they hunting for me?' Dusty asked.

'Not scouting the country or anything. I reckon they figure that you've gone and won't be back. Mind you though, I'd've thought they'd make more effort to get you.'

'Likely Spargo doesn't want his men off on a manhunt when there'll be work for them to do around here,' Dusty guessed.

'I won't take up any more time,' Hardin said, moving towards the rear of the wagon. 'You'll have work to do.'

'Sure, Uncle Joel. I'll let you know how things're going.' Returning to the gate of the wagon, Hardin swung over it and to the ground. 'Sorry, young feller,' he told Stone in a

carrying voice that differed from the whispered conversation inside. 'Them hides're all right, but not what I want.'

'It's your loss,' Stone replied.

'Try the soldiers out to the Fort,' Hardin suggested. 'They're allus needing rawhide.'

'We'll likely do that,' Stone said, mounting his horse and looking at Chow. 'Let's get moving.'

Satisfied that arrangements would be made to warn the citizens of the surrounding counties, Dusty hoped to avert clashes between them and the State Police. He remained out of sight until well clear of the town, then joined Chow on the wagon box and they headed for where the rest of the party had hid out.

During the rest of the day they remained at the original campsite and made their plans. Peaceful Gunn and Johnny Raybold, the former snedding his usual pose, stated that they possessed sufficient local knowledge to do all Dusty needed. Using a bared and leveled piece of ground, the two men produced stick-scratched maps which told their companions much of the three counties' geography. Then Johnny suggested a possible hideout for the chuck wagon and remuda while the men made their raids.

According to Belle, the eviction parties intended to work outwards from Fort Andrew. Situated close to where the town of Ravenna would one day grow, the Fort stood in a comparatively central position for the three counties and

could throw support to the State Police in either direction should it be required. Dusty intended to see that it should.

With the chuckwagon and remuda hidden, Dusty aimed to split the party into two groups. The floating outfit, Johnny, Doc and Rusty would form one, while Stone commanded the other. Complaining bitterly, Chow found himself allocated the task of keeping camp instead of riding with his boss.

Early that evening, on the pretence of visiting the neighboring ranches, Hardin rode out of town. He stopped at his ruined home long enough to leave sheets, scissors, needles and thread which the Kid collected. With typical cowhand versatility, the floating outfit and Wedge produced their own hoods. Wishing to avoid any connection with the Ku Klux Klan, Dusty had the hoods made in dome shape and large enough to be worn over a Stetson. He also suggested that they hung loosely and no longer than to the elbow. That way there would be no impediment to such vital movements as drawing and shooting a revolver.

By midnight, at the cost of some pricked fingers and much cursing, every member of the raiding parties possessed a serviceable hood. Belle met Dusty at the barn, having slipped away from town, and gave the latest news. After hearing his proposed plans, she gave her approval and arranged a rendezvous near the Fort to which she would be returning.

‘I’ll be living in the hotel outside the stockade,’ she said. ‘There’s a small town grown up around the Fort, so nobody will think anything of that.’

‘We’ll find some way to get word to you and fix a place to meet,’ Dusty promised.

‘There’s one good thing,’ the girl went on. ‘Captain Robbins of the State Police was killed and so far there’s not a replacement to handle the Lamar County evictions. You’ll only have to worry about Fannin and Grayson for the first few days.’

On arrival at the new location, Dusty saw his companions settled in. Accompanied by Johnny Raybold and dressed in a change from his normal black clothing, the Kid rode into the small town close to the sheltering walls of Fort Andrew. Acting like cowhands on their way south from completing a trail drive, they loafed around town all day until Belle found an opportunity to contact them. Johnny suggested the site for a rendezvous, a small, deserted cabin something over a mile outside town. Belle agreed that it might fit her needs and promised to meet Dusty there with such information as came up. Leaving the alley down which the meeting took place, it being after sundown and dark enough for their purposes, the two cowhands rejoined their companions.

After midnight that same night, Dusty met Belle at the cabin. It proved to be a small, one room structure with a V-roof. While a stout beam ran across the center of the cabin, no further work had been done to make an upstairs room under the roof. However, the lack of development did not bother Dusty or Belle. Lying some short way from the main trail and hidden behind a screen of trees, it offered a fine meeting place.

Accompanying the girl to town, Dusty took possession of a case containing almost fifteen thousand dollars. Unless he missed his guess, the money came from a stolen State Police payroll and he regarded the use it would be put to as poetic justice.

On Saturday night Belle brought news that the eviction parties would be starting the following day. She gave Dusty a list of their calls, wished him the best of luck and promised to visit the cabin each night in case he should need anything or she have further news.

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Backed by eight Negro officers, Bede Dalkins of the State Police headed for the Rendal ranch's house. Ranch might be something of an aggrandizement by South- or even Mid-Texas standards. Rendal ran a small beef and milk herd, grew crops and made a reasonable living. It being Sunday morning, Dalkins figured to take Rendal by surprise. The rancher had a name for being able to handle his end in a fight, so Dalkins meant to take no chances. On arrival, his men fanned into line before the house and he raised his voice.

'Rendal. Come on out here!'

The rancher walked out. Significant to anybody who knew him, he did not wear or carry a gun. If the State Police thought anything of the remarkable lapse, they put it down to the day being Sunday, when Rendal expected no trouble.

'Howdy,' greeted Rendal.

‘Been checking up and learned you owe five hundred and eighty-seven dollars back taxes, Rendal,’ Dalkins declared. ‘We’ve come to collect it or serve eviction papers on you.’

Behind Dalkins, the Negro officers tensed and fingered their carbines. At the first hostile movement they intended to start shooting. However Rendal just stood with thumbs hooked into his waistband.

‘Which is it,’ Dalkins demanded, ‘pay, or get out?’

‘Got sort of used to the old place,’ Rendal answered evenly. ‘I’ll pay.’

Amazement prevented any of the posse from shooting Rendal in the pretence that they thought he reached into his pants pocket for a weapon. With bugged out eyes, they watched him count off the necessary money from a roll of notes.

‘Where in hell did you get this?’ Dalkins growled.

‘Sold off some cattle to a herd going north,’ the rancher replied blandly. ‘Do I get a receipt for it?’

‘Sure!’ Dalkins spat out.

Before leaving on the eviction tour, each party had received an official receipt book. When questions were raised, their leaders wished to be able to claim that everything had been legal and above board. Not that Dalkins expected to use any, the counties involved being less fortunate in the matter of raising large herds of cattle than their southern contemporaries. Yet Rendal had paid and Dalkins knew he could do no other than hand over a receipt.

Two hooded men walked from the house after the posse passed out of sight. Turning, Rendal handed over the remainder of his bankroll and grinned as the smaller man pocketed it.

‘I’d like to thank you boys,’ he said. ‘Just got this place starting to pay, but I couldn’t’ve raised those back taxes. I sure felt scared, standing there without a gun, even knowing you pair stood inside ready to cover me.’

‘Likely,’ Dusty answered, his voice muffled under the hood. ‘Only without a gun, they’d think twice afore throwing down on you. Keep that receipt safe and start saving to pay it back.’

‘To them?’ Rendal yelped.

‘To the next elected Texas Government,’ corrected Dusty. ‘See you around.’

With that he and Rusty collected their waiting horses and joined up with the rest of the party who had been strategically concealed about the place.

‘Redruth’s the next,’ Dusty said. ‘Reckon you can get us there, Johnny?’

‘Happen you OD Connected yahoos don’t slow the Wedge down I can,’ replied the redhead. ‘Let’s go.’

Feeling puzzled, Dalkins led his men along the winding trail to the Redruth ranch. Behind him, the Negroes muttered among themselves. Then one of them rode to their leader’s side.

‘That’s one place we don’t get,’ the Negro said sullenly. ‘I’d got my eye on it too.’

Like most of their white superiors, the Negro members of the State Police were keeping their sights on the main chance. Knowing something of the plan, each colored officer intended to take over one of the ranches and use 'the folks from back East' to work it. Seeing one likely place slip through their fingers aroused the suspicions which always lurked at the bottom of their association with the white members of their organization.

'Maybe we should go back and run him off,' suggested another Negro when Dalkins did not reply.

'There'll be time for that later,' Dalkins answered. 'We'll go on to see Redruth. Since he bust his leg, he'll not be likely to have money enough to pay.'

Still muttering among themselves, the Negroes followed his lead. On arrival at the Redruth place, they saw the owner standing outside, unarmed and supporting himself on a crutch. Like Rendal, he showed no sign of concern when told about the back taxes.

'Figured that's what brought you,' he said. 'Make out a receipt while I count her off for you.'

'Maybe you'd best start by telling us where you got the money,' Dalkins snarled, staring at the roll of bills the rancher held.

'Sold a bunch of cattle to a herd going north,' Redruth replied. 'Care to see the bill-of-sale?'

That's enough talk, Massa Dalkins,' put in the Negro's spokesman. 'I say we should oughta—'

The words trailed off as a man stepped from the open doorway of the house. Small in build, dressed in ordinary range clothes, only two things about him seemed worthy of note; First, he wore a gunbelt with matched white-handled Colts butt forward in fast-draw holsters. Second, he wore a white hood which hid his features and hung to elbow level. On appearance his hands crossed in a sight-defying flicker, producing, cocking and lining the matched Colts in a split second.

Take the money and stay alive,' he said.

'What the—!' Dalkins began, conscious that one Colt lined squarely at his chest while the other moved in an arc along the men at his left.

'You never had better advice, *hombre*,' declared a voice from the right end of the building.

Turning his head, Dalkins saw another hooded figure, armed and watchful, to his flank. Then he became aware that an unspecified number of further men covered his party.

'So that's the game, is it?' he snarled, although the sound came out more as a whine. 'You make us hand over a receipt and run us off.'

'Now there's a novel thought,' drawled the small man at the door. 'For shame on you, putting evil ideas in our heads. We just happened to be here and don't aim to stop you peace officer gents carrying out your rightful and legal duty for the Sovereign State of Texas.'

'Just happened to be here, hoods and all!' Dalkins spat out.

'If the hood's bothering you, I'll take it off,' Dusty offered, raising his left hand, still holding the Colt, towards the top of his head. "Course then we'll have to shoot you all. The Sons of Texas Liberty're sworn not to reveal who they are and you wouldn't want us to go back on our solemn-took oath. Still if you want the hood off—'

Around Dalkins the Negroes moved restlessly. So far the dreaded Ku Klux Klan had not made an appearance in Texas, although word of its fight against 'liberal' oppression had reached the Lone Star State. Highly colored tales of carpetbagger officials, black or white, being flogged, shot or hanged came too often to be all fabrication. So the majority of the State Police lived in dread of the day when the Klan came into being among the bone-tough fighting men of Texas. From all appearances that day had come.

'I states without fear of contr-i-diction that I for one ain't curious a-tall, sah,' one of the Negroes stated and a rumble of agreement came from the rest.

'How about you, mister?' Dusty asked, directing his words at Dalkins.

'You can't get away with this!' the man answered.

'With what?' countered Dusty. 'All we want is for you to do your business and ride on.'

'Are you siding this lot, Redruth?' demanded Dalkins.

'Like the man said, they're just passing by,' the rancher replied and held out the money.

Scowling and muttering, Dalkins dismounted. He put away any rash thoughts of jumping the rancher for a hostage and transacted the business. Although a crafty glint came to his eyes, it died again as Dusty spoke in a manner which almost made the man believe in mind-reading.

‘Wouldn’t want to cast doubts about this gent’s honesty. But was I you, I’d compare the signature he puts on the receipt with this one.’

Shock twisted Dalkins’ face as he realized that the hooded man held an official State Police report form. So he altered his decision and scrupulously ensured that his signature did not differ from normal.

‘I’d admire to feed you gents, but paying my back taxes puts me a mite short,’ Redruth said, pocketing the receipt.

Angrily Dalkins turned and swung astride his horse. He swung it around and led his men away. None of them noticed a rider watching them from cover, or that he trailed along after them.

‘Thought you said we’d get Redruth’s place for sure,’ growled the leader of the Negroes.

‘I didn’t see you bunch making any moves to take on them hooded bastards,’ Dalkins answered.

‘My mammy allus taught me to be real respectful and do like the white folks said,’ the Negro sneered. ‘And you never said nothing about fighting ’em.’

‘Maybe there’s some of ’em watching the next place,’ another Negro put in.

‘They’ll have a long wait,’ Dalkins snarled. ‘We’re going to Dutchy Haben’s spread instead of to Ickling’s. I don’t reckon they’ll be watching over him.’

‘What if they is watching over him?’ insisted the Negro.

‘Then we’ll make ’em wish they hadn’t been. You and Shadrack reckon to be the best shots, so you two stop hid out while the rest of us ride in. Then when them hooded bastards show, you throw lead into them.’

None of the Negroes could offer a better piece of strategy than that presented by Dalkins. So they followed him without further question. Turning off to the left of the trail which led to the Ickling ranch, the party headed in the new direction, feeling certain that they had outsmarted the opposition.

From his place behind and a quarter of a mile away, the Kid watched the change of route. While new to the territory, his study of the Wedge cowhands’ maps and early training in such matters told him that they were no longer heading for the Ickling place. However Dusty had made arrangements to cover such a contingency.

Dropping from the saddle of his big white, and darting a glance at the two Wedge horses rein-tied to the horn, the Kid studied the surrounding area. Then he removed a small pile of dry twigs from his saddlebags and stepped clear of the horses. While they travelled through rolling, wood-dotted country, he did not aim to be caught without the means of starting the necessary fire. Swiftly he piled the

twigs and gathered more kindling to offer the makings of a decent blaze.

‘Grandpappy Long Walker never had it this easy,’ he grinned to himself, rasping a match head against the seat of his pants and applying the resulting flame to the base of his dry twigs.

When a small fire built up, the Kid collected a blanket which hung ready on the cantle of his saddle. Then he piled green leaves on the blaze and watched the pungent smoke roll upwards. Deftly covering the smoldering mass with the blanket, he prepared to send a warning to his friends.

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Holding their horses to a speed that the poor mounts of the State Police posse could not equal, Dusty’s party headed in the most direct line for the Ickling ranch. They had removed their hoods to avoid adding extra noticeability should anybody see them and each led two spare horses. All the time they rode, one of them watched their rear.

‘That danged war-whoop’s sending up smoke, Dusty,’ Johnny announced, turning to face the front again. ‘Two puffs. They’ve turned off the trail to the left.’

‘Where’ll that take ‘em?’ Dusty asked, reining in his big paint.

‘Could be either Ogden or Haben’s place.’

‘Which one, Dusty?’ asked Mark.

‘Haben was a copperhead in the war,’ Johnny put in. ‘Kinda friendly to the Davis thieves. I’d say Ogden’s.’

‘They’d expect us to be there,’ Dusty guessed. ‘Nope. Haben’s on the list. I’m betting that’s where they go. They’ll never expect us to be helping him.’

‘If we’re wrong—’ Johnny began.

‘We’ll face *that* if it comes up,’ Mark told him. ‘Haben’s place, Dusty?’

‘Haben’s place,’ the small Texan agreed.

Fourteen - A Mighty Strange Banking House

Urging on their horses, Dusty's party soon left the State Police posse well behind. On arrival at the Haben place, hoods once more in position, they rode right to the front of the house. Haben, a bulky, cropped-haired man of obvious Germanic appearance, stepped out holding a shotgun.

'I thought this kind of thing had all blown over!' he said, scowling along the line of hooded men.

'We've come to warn you—' Dusty began, seeing the scared faces of two women at the windows.

'All this time since the end of the war and it is not forgotten,' Haben went on as if he had not heard a word. 'I've tried to be a good neighbor, but you still won't let it be forgotten that I followed my beliefs and fought for the Union in the war.'

'I don't know what you mean, Mr. Haben,' Dusty declared. 'But we've come to warn you that the State Police're on their way here to collect your back taxes, or evict you.'

'And you come to help me do what, fight them? To bring me into conflict with the State Government and have *them* run me off my ranch?'

'To offer our help—'

'Wearing hoods, hiding your faces like outlaws?'

‘Damn it to hell—!’ Johnny barked and Rusty mumbled something deep in his throat.

While Dusty also disliked the implications of the remark, he held his temper. ‘We have to wear the hoods for your protection as well as our own,’ he said. ‘If you can’t identify us, you won’t have to lie about it.’

‘I want no help from you!’ Haben yelled. ‘If the State Police come, I will pay what I can and ask for time to give them the rest.’

‘Giving time’s not what they’re coming for,’ Dusty warned. ‘We can—’

‘I want no help from you!’ interrupted Haben. ‘Go before they come and I will not mention you’ve been here.’

‘It’s your choice,’ Dusty said evenly, cutting off Johnny and Rusty’s indignant comments. ‘Let’s go, boys.’

‘Damn stupid, hawg-headed metzel!’ Johnny spat out as they rode off.

‘Are we leaving, Dusty?’ asked Doc.

‘Not too far,’ Dusty replied. ‘Once we’re out of sight, we’ll leave the hosses and move back on foot. Get close enough to take a hand when they come.’

‘*If* they come,’ Johnny put in.

‘You wouldn’t want to lay five lil ole iron men that they don’t, now would you?’ drawled Mark.

‘Five it is,’ grinned Johnny, more out of a love for gambling than through any conviction that Dusty might be wrong.

Unaware that Dusty's party had not left the vicinity, Haben watched the State Police officers riding up. Although disturbed by the visit from the hooded riders, he fought against believing that they might have told the truth. Despite having supported the Union during the war, he regarded the State Police with some misgivings and admitted they left much to be desired in the execution of their duties.

'Good afternoon,' he greeted as the men dismounted.

'Come for your back taxes, Dutchy,' Dalkins announced without preamble. 'Make it four hundred and thirty-two dollars.'

'How long do I have to raise the money?'

'Right until after your missus's fed us.'

'But—!' Haben gasped.

'Don't want no "buts", Dutchy,' interrupted Dalkins. 'Either you pay up, or start packing ready to leave.'

'I will go to your superiors and ask for time.'

'You'll be riding for nothing,' Dalkins told him, darting glances around, and believing that the hooded men would have made their appearance by this time if they were present. 'Now pay up, or start packing—or do we have to show you a lesson that we mean business.'

'*What!*' Haben shouted. 'You come here and threaten me. *You*, the State Police? *Gott in himmel!* I fought for the North because I believed in them, made enemies of my friends for my beliefs. And now you come here—'

‘Sounds like he’s saying “no”, boys,’ Dalkins growled, drawing his Colt as he stepped forward and swinging it up with the butt held for striking not shooting.

Suddenly, with shocking force, Haben realized that he had left his shotgun on the porch when he saw that the second party approaching his house wore the badges of the State Police. Behind Dalkins, the Negroes held their carbines ready for use and the German read eagerness on their faces. If he made a move to resist, lead would crash into him. After that—he did not want to think about the fate of his wife and daughter.

Confident that the two Negroes left behind could prevent interference, Dalkins prepared to pistol-whip the German to the ground.

Only the rear guard had troubles of their own.

Cradling their carbines ready for use, with the barrels rested on convenient rocks, the Negroes watched the house front for the first sight of the hooded men.

‘I bets that I hits that big jasper with the two white-handled guns smack a-tween his two eyes, Joseph,’ said the shorter of the pair.

‘You leave him to me, Shad,’ his companion answered. ‘I’ll —’

‘Just set down them carbines, boys,’ ordered a low voice from behind them. ‘And do it easy, I can drop you both afore you turn.’

Twisting their heads around, they saw a tall, hooded man armed with bowie knife and an old Dragoon Colt, looking

along the barrel of a Winchester rifle in their direction. Both realized the futility of arguing and set down their carbines as commanded. Then they rose, Shad more rapidly than his more bulky companion. As he came erect, Joseph hurled himself forward with big hands reaching at the Kid.

Even as his finger started to tighten on the Winchester's trigger, the Kid remembered that Dusty wanted no bloodshed if it could be avoided. Moving with all the speed of his Comanche upbringing, he swayed aside. The rifle left his shoulder, swinging around to crash its butt into the side of Joseph's jaw as the man staggered by. From the limp manner in which the man went down, the Kid concluded there would be no further trouble from that source.

Although Shad did not intend to disobey, Joseph's actions left him no real choice. Bending down, he grabbed at the discarded carbine and saw his companion's attack fail. From felling the first man, the Kid leapt forward. Up and down swung his arm, slicing the side of the rifle's barrel on to Shad's lowered head and tumbling him unconscious to the ground.

Dalkins' idea for defending his party had been thwarted by Dusty Fog's almost uncanny habit of thinking as the other man would and then planning to circumvent the moves.

Before Dalkins' revolver could crash into Haben's face, a carbine cracked. Lead struck the raised weapon, batting it from the man's fingers and bringing a howl of pain as slivers of metal sprayed his hand. Instantly the Texans rose

from their places of concealment and lined their saddle-guns at the State Police.

Instead of bullets screaming down from the rear guard's position, a wild yell shattered the air. Turning startled eyes in its direction, the Negroes saw a hooded man where their friends ought to be.

'Don't try nothing!' counseled one of the posse. 'He must've got Joseph 'n' Shadrack.'

'Toss them carbines to one side!' Dusty called.

The Negroes obeyed without argument and showed no sign of making trouble as the small Texan walked down to the front of the house. Winchester carbine under his arm, he looked from Haben to where Dalkins knelt nursing a stinging, bloody hand. Fury showed on the injured man's face as he recognized his assailant.

'So you're in it with 'em, Haben!' Dalkins gritted.

'In what?' Dusty put in before the German could deny the accusation. 'We just happened to be passing on the way to a lodge meeting and saw what we thought to be a hold up. So we, being law-abiding citizens, cut in and stopped it.'

'You know we're State Police!' Dalkins spat out.

'Not from the way you were acting just now,' Dusty denied blandly. 'Still, seeing's you are, get on with what you're here to do.'

'I've only three hundred dollars,' Haben told Dalkins. 'Will you take that and let me pay the rest after I've sold some vegetables and beef to the Fort at the end of the week?'

‘With this jasper backing you I can’t argue,’ Dalkins answered.

‘That’s a real fine mule you’ve got back in the corral, friend,’ Dusty remarked. ‘I’m right took with him. Would you sell him to me for two hundred dollars?’

‘You mean—?’ Haben gasped.

‘Cash on the barrelhead,’ Dusty agreed, taking out a roll of notes.

Surprise showed on the German’s face, but he could think fast enough to see the possibilities of the offer. While a fine animal, the mule was not worth two hundred dollars and could be replaced.

‘I’ll sell,’ he said.

‘Make me out a bill-of-sale after these gents’ve done their business and gone,’ Dusty suggested. ‘I wouldn’t want it said that I stopped the law getting on with its rightful duties.’

Watching the State Police ride away, Haben shook his head as if still unable to believe what he had seen.

‘He really meant it,’ the German gasped.

‘I tried to warn you, friend,’ Dusty replied.

‘*Ja*, you tried. But why do you help me?’

‘You’re a Texan. That’s enough. Say, about that mule. I don’t care for his color now I come to think about it. Let’s call the sale off.’

‘But the money—’

‘I’ll let you know where to send it when things get a little better.’

Declining offers to stay and eat with the Habens, Dusty rejoined his companions and rode off. However, the State Police had returned the way they came, collected their two barely conscious companions—the Kid having withdrawn after unloading the carbines—and continued along the back trail. From all appearances it seemed that Dalkins had called off any further attempts at tax collection and was heading towards Fort Andrew.

Dalkins had so much to think about that he let his colored companions push on ahead. Slowly an idea began to form on how he might yet discredit his hooded enemies. Carefully he scanned the surrounding ranges, without seeing any sign of the men following him. Most likely they would be pushing their horses at top speed for another ranch and did not realize that he was returning to Fort Andrew.

‘Wait ahead, you Johnny Reb bastards,’ he muttered. ‘Time you figger I’m not coming, it’ll be long too late.’

With the sun sinking in the west, the Fort lay almost two miles away, a distance Dalkins felt ideally suited his plans. Hearing him stop his horse, the Negroes also came to a halt. Head wrapped ostentatiously in a white bandage, Joseph turned and rode back.

‘What’s up?’ he demanded.

‘Go on to the Fort,’ Dalkins replied. ‘I’ll make sure that we’re not being followed by them hooded bastards.’

‘How about the money?’

‘I’ll see to it.’

Further away from town and Joseph might have argued the point. Not when so close that shots might be heard and investigated. While General Smethurst and some of his officers had 'liberal' tendencies and could be relied upon to take a colored gentleman's word, the majority of his troops tended to support other white men in matters involving a Negro. So Joseph kept his suspicions to himself and gave a casual shrug.

'You're the boss, man,' he said and swung the horse to ride to his friends.

Watching the Negroes continue on their way, Dalkins let out a snort. He might have explained his plan to them, but failed to see any reason why he should. Swinging his horse from the trail, he rode towards a clump of trees. There he dismounted and fastened the reins to a sapling. Taking the bag with the tax money from his saddle, he walked off into the trees. After searching for a short time, he found what he wanted, a big old chestnut tree with its base hollowed out. Bending down, he started to stuff the moneybag inside.

'That's a mighty strange banking house, mister.'

At the sound of the voice, Dalkins started to jerk himself back out of the hole. In doing so, he crashed his head against its edge. Bright lights flashed before his eyes and his dazed condition prevented the chance of fast movement. When his vision cleared, he found himself faced with a tall, hooded man. The needle-sharp point of a Bowie knife rested against his Adam's apple and already his Colt had been plucked from its holster and tossed aside.

‘Th—There’s almost a thousand dollars in here,’ he croaked, gesturing weakly with the bag. ‘Take it—’

‘Now there’s a novel notion, for sure,’ drawled the Kid, never relaxing his vigilance. ‘A lawman offering a bribe to a citizen.’

‘Wh—What’re you going to do to me?’ Dalkins croaked.

‘Well now, the Grand Imperial Wizard’ll have ideas on that, I’d say. Let’s go ask him, shall we?’

~*~

Normally a rider coming at a leisurely pace down the single street of the small town outside Fort Andrew attracted little or no attention. Dalkins created something of a stir when he came in. It was not every day a man arrived seated facing his horse’s rump, feet fastened in the stirrups, arms lashed to a pole laid across his shoulders. Around his neck hung the bag containing the tax money and a large sheet of white paper with words printed boldly on it.

‘Caught attempting to steal county tax money and returned for trial,’ read one of the people attracted by the sight. ‘What the hell—?’

Which sentiment General Smethurst repeated even more vehemently as he came from the hotel with Belle Boyd at his side. Then he strode forward, bellowing for a pair of nearby soldiers to stop the horse and haul its rider from the saddle.

Tall, lean, sallow-faced and sullen mouthed Smethurst gave an impression of voluntary untidiness and his uniform

carried the insignia of a colonel. At that time the U.S. Army was plagued by the 'brevet' rank system. While a brevet rank might be awarded for meritorious service, it carried no pay and had no bearing on future promotion. As in Smethurst's case, the holder of the brevet rank was called by it out of courtesy, but held down a much less exalted post than the title suggested. The 'general' commanded an under-strength regiment, not a brigade or division, fact which never failed to annoy him.

'What's all this, General?' Belle asked.

'How the he—!' Smethurst began, then stopped himself. The change came less from respect for Belle's sex than a realization that Miss 'Montoon' had the means to do his career considerable harm. 'I couldn't say.'

'If the allegation is true, it must be investigated thoroughly,' the girl stated, knowing that Dusty must have sent the man into town in such a way.

'I'll see it is,' gritted Smethurst.

Having come to Fort Andrew to witness the start of the scheme he had helped to hatch, Sheriff Spargo heard the news and hurried from the small shack which housed his local office. After being told what Belle had demanded, he instructed his deputies to take Dalkins to the office and requested that the General be present for the interview. While the men would probably have preferred to deal with the matter during her absence, Belle showed no inclination to leave.

Faced by the coldly accusing eyes of Belle, the sheriff and Smethurst, with the trio of deputies hovering in the background, Dalkins told his story. He saw the flicker of worry which passed across Smethurst and Spargo's faces when he mentioned the hooded riders. However, Miss 'Montoon' gave no indication that she attached any importance to that aspect of the affair, except in the last part.

'How did they come to capture you?' she asked, for Dalkins did no more than state the bare fact that the hooded men had sent him into town.

'It was like this,' Dalkins answered and, sucking in a deep breath, launched into a reasonably truthful account of his capture.

'Telling his story, he became struck with how flimsy it sounded. Nor could he see any sign of belief in the noble nature of his motives appear on the faces of his listeners. Belle started to raise suspicion among the men, or continued to build on the foundations already laid.

'I must say that this whole affair strikes me as peculiar to say the least,' she stated. 'Did you inform your companions of what you planned to do, and why?'

'Sure,' Dalkins answered, but his slight hesitation told the girl he lied.

'That can easily be verified,' she said and looked at Spargo. 'Will you send your men to collect the officers who accompanied him, sheriff?'

'Is there any need for all this?' Spargo growled.

'I feel so,' Belle answered. 'Do you want accusations of complicity leveled at you?'

'How come?' demanded the sheriff.

'By letting it seem that you failed to investigate this matter thoroughly. Either prove or disprove his story now and there will be no chance later of hardshell donks accusing you.'

An argument calculated to reach one of Spargo's mentality. Knowing the excellent use his own kind made of smear campaigns and accusations, he could see all too well what the girl meant. So he gave the order for Ritson and Baker to gather up and bring in the Negro officers to be questioned.

Riled at being disturbed from what ought to have been an enjoyable evening, Joseph, first of the posse to be questioned, looked sullen and showed little desire to be cooperative. Nor could Spargo or Smethurst change his attitude. Suddenly Belle slapped the palm of her hand hard on the desktop and her eyes fixed on the Negro's.

'I want some answers and I want them right now!' she snapped.

Having spent all her formative years on a Southern plantation, Belle possessed an instinctive way for dealing with colored people. Contrary to 'liberal' views, the upper-class Southerners understood the Negroes and, in most cases, got on far better with them than did the intellectuals who dripped smug talk of equality or pretended friendship to them.

As he tried to meet the girl's cold eyes, Joseph felt distinctly uneasy. He wanted to snarl defiance, yet something held him from doing so. Much to the surprise of the other men, he answered the girl without any hint of the fencing which met their efforts.

'Massa Dalkins just told us to come on into town, ma'am,' he said.

'Why did he do that?'

'Allowed to be stopping so's he could see if them hooded fellers was still follering us.'

'Had they been following you?'

'Not as we'd seen, ma'am,' Joseph replied, darting a glance at Dalkins. 'Fact being, we'd not seen 'em after we left the Haben place.'

'Did you ask him about the tax money?' Belle asked.

'Yes'm,' agreed the Negro. 'He allowed it'd be safe with him. He was the cap'n, ma'am, so what could we do but what he told us?'

'Why you stinking burr-head!' Dalkins bawled, starting forward. 'I'll—'

Whipping out his Adams, Ritson slashed its barrel on to the advancing man's skull and toppled him to the floor before he had covered half the distance to Joseph.

'I'm opposed to violence,' Belle said primly. 'But feel it was justified on this occasion. You may go. Ask the next man to come in.'

Each of the remaining Negroes confirmed Joseph's story and painted a dark picture against the groaning Dalkins.

Recognizing dissent among their white companions, they gave the answers they felt were expected. Basically they told the truth, but in a damning manner.

‘To my mind this smacks of attempted embezzlement of public funds by a senior police officer,’ Bell stated, conscious that Ritson was studying her all the time.

‘That’s putting it strongly,’ Spargo growled, realizing that Dalkins knew too much about the grand plan to be antagonized.

‘He sent his escort away a good two miles from town, knowing these hooded men might be close by. And according to his story, he was caught actually secreting the money in a hollow tree—’

‘He told us why he did that,’ Smethurst put in.

‘To accuse the hooded riders of robbing him,’ Belle purred sarcastically. ‘But they did not rob him, they sent him into town with the money around his neck. Perhaps he acted as he claimed—or he may have thought up that very thin story after his capture.’

‘We’ll hold him and investigate the affair thoroughly,’ Smethurst decided. ‘More serious, to my mind, is the presence of these hooded men.’

‘Most likely they’re only a bunch of local cowhands,’ Spargo answered.

‘No more than that?’ snorted Smethurst. ‘They appear at two out of three places our men visit and allow the back taxes to be collected, but stop any rough stuff. And where did the money for the taxes come from?’

'I'd've sworn not one ranch in a dozen would be able to pay,' admitted Spargo. 'And yet they all did. Maybe the hooded men gave them the money.'

'Where'd they get it?' Belle asked.

'There're plenty of rich Texans, Hardin and his kind, who'd play out to stop what we pl—' Spargo began, then stopped as he realized that the girl did not know their intentions.

'What did you plan?' Belle inquired innocently.

'To make these ranchers pay their share towards the upkeep of the State,' Smethurst answered blandly. 'If they can't, to sell their property to people who will.'

'How'd word get out about the tax collection?' Ritson put in. 'Way it sounded to me, those jaspers knew just where to go.'

Before Belle could try to steer the conversation into less dangerous lines, the door opened and a Negro officer of the State Police entered.

'You went out with the Grayson County tax collectors,' Smethurst said. 'What's wrong?'

'We got jumped at the third place by some hooded fellers,' the Negro replied. 'They shot Massa Hendricks and wounded three of us, then run us off.'

What he did not explain was that Hendricks and the posse had been rough-handling the ranch's occupants when the hooded riders swept up; or that Hendricks had started the shooting but made the fatal mistake of missing. Guessing that more needed saying, Belle forced the issue and came

to something approximating the truth. Not that hearing it altered Smethurst's feelings.

'I'm going to smash them!' he shouted. 'I'm not having any of this Ku Klux Klan stuff in my territory. I'll find and smash them even if it takes every man under my command.'

Fifteen - Too Smart For A Soft-Shell Girl

‘You’ve done well, Dusty,’ Belle said as she met him in the cabin later on the night of his busy day. ‘And from what you told me, Stone prevented rape if nothing worse in Grayson.’

‘Sure. I didn’t want killing, but he’d no choice,’ Dusty answered. ‘What’d they make of the hooded riders?’

‘None of them are sure whether to blame local cowhands, or outside help hired by General Hardin’s party,’ the girl answered. ‘I’m trying to steer them from the latter if I can.’

‘How’re they fixing to deal with us?’

‘Send out more patrols, with a sizeable Army escort. It will take a few days to arrange, but Smethurst plans to hit every ranch at once if he can—and he can, he’s the men to do it.’

‘And we haven’t, without getting so many hands that there’ll be no controlling them.’

‘That’s true, Dusty.’

‘There’s only one thing to do then,’ Dusty stated. ‘Stir up so much fuss that they’ll be so busy hunting us they won’t have time to think about tax collection.’

‘They’ve orders to shoot on sight,’ warned Belle.

‘Then we’ll just have to make sure they never see us,’ Dusty grinned. ‘It’s you I’m most worried about.’

‘Don’t be,’ the girl smiled. ‘I’m all right. Nobody suspects me.’

‘If they do, pull out fast,’ Dusty told her. ‘Those soft-shells’ll not let you being a woman stop them mean-handling you.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Belle replied. ‘I’ve been playing this game for a long time, you know.’

‘Feller I knew’d been taking the bedsprings out of bad horses for near on twenty years,’ Dusty answered. ‘He got on a tame old plug one day, was thrown off and bust his neck because he’d got over-confident.’

‘I’ll remember what you say,’ Belle promised. ‘Now let’s get out of here, shall we?’

No matter that he found the whole business extremely distasteful, Dusty put all his energy into making it a success. Starting next day he began the task of harassing the local State Police by running off their horses. While evading an Army patrol, Stone Hart’s party met up with a group of Negro officers sent up to reinforce the local department. After disarming and destroying the officers’ weapons, the Texans set them a-foot and issued a grim warning that a second meeting would bring a more severe and permanent penalty.

For a week the hooded riders seemed to be everywhere that they should not, but, aided by Belle’s information, never where the Army’s patrols went looking for them. Using much the same tactics which had made Dusty famous during the war, the Texans struck terror into the hearts of the State Police. While no more officers were killed or

injured, several decided not to tempt fate. The number of resignations, or desertions reduced the force's ranks and requests for replacements found no volunteers.

So Belle found herself able to make a cheerful report when she met Dusty at the rendezvous on Friday night.

'You've stirred up a regular hornet's nest,' she announced in satisfaction. 'There's a marked reluctance among the few remaining State Police officers to leave town. And playing off the Army against them's working.'

One of the rules Dusty had insisted on was that their efforts be entirely directed against the State Police. This culminated on Wednesday night when the Kid set free the mounts of the Police officers, but left the horses belonging to the cavalry escort. Word soon passed out among the soldiers that the hooded riders bore no animosity towards them, only against the State Police. Little love being lost between the junior members of the two organizations, the soldiers tended to become slack in the hunt for Dusty's men.

'What's the next game?' Dusty asked.

'A mass hunt for you in Fannin and Grayson,' Belle replied, 'and at the same time a sweep of Lamar County. Big parties hitting each ranch on the same day, just as Smethurst planned.'

'When?'

'Starting on Monday.'

'I'll have a couple of the boys head for Lamar, spread the word and make sure each rancher can pay off the taxes,'

Dusty stated. 'Let's hope the money lasts out. Everything all right at your end?'

'I'm not sure. One of Spargo's deputies is showing a whole lot of interest in me. Ritson, the one you escaped from in Bonham. He's been asking me questions about the Montoon's background, but I know the answers to them.'

'Is he on to you?'

'I'm not sure. He spent an uncomfortable night in the alley outside my room last night.'

'Was he there this evening?' Dusty growled.

'No,' Belle smiled. 'We had supper together and drank our coffee in the hotel lobby. Then he went to sleep sitting in the chair. Two bellhops took him to his room.'

'Are you still using that ring you had in the war?'

'Yes, but the powder the Yankees gave me is much better. The kind I used takes no longer to work, but looks more natural—and leaves the one who gets it with a bad headache when he wakes.'

One of the devices Belle used for her protection had been a version of the Borgia poison ring. Pressure on a secret spring caused the top of its heavy stone to rise and in the cavity below lay a potent sleeping powder. It seemed that the ring still retained its old effectiveness.

'If he's suspicious, you'd best pull out,' Dusty suggested.

'My work's not done yet. By the way, they sent Dalkins to Austin for a full investigation. But he was shot dead trying to escape.'

'When did this happen?' Dusty asked.

‘Yesterday. Or we heard about it yesterday when Baker and Spurgis came in. I think they were scared Dalkins would tell me what lay behind the tax collection and got rid of him.’

‘It’s possible,’ Dusty admitted. ‘What next?’

‘I’m not sure. Have one of the boys come into town tomorrow evening and if there’s any news I’ll signal to him in the usual way; then you can meet me here.’

Following the system arranged to meet the situation, Silent Churchman rode into town at sundown the next day. Belle had been keeping watch for whichever member of the Wedge would come, sitting in the hotel lobby and looking through the window in a casual manner. No one seeing her could imagine that the girl seethed with excitement and concern.

Languidly she rose, picked up the parasol from against her chair and rested it on her shoulder. Without as much as a glance in Silent’s direction, she strolled along the street towards the sheriff’s office. Nobody watching thought anything of Silent staring at the girl, that was typical cowhand behavior. However his attention focused on the parasol, noting that it rested on the left shoulder and twirled several times.

Despite knowing that the signal meant Belle must see Dusty that night, Silent knew better than to ride straight out of town. No cowhand would pass a saloon on a Saturday without calling in to take a drink. So he followed the usual pattern. What he saw inside caused him to leave after one

drink and take a hurried, if devious, return to his companions.

‘That damned deputy with the busted nose killed Dutch Haben,’ the small cowhand told Dusty. ‘Picked a fight and shot him down without a chance.’

‘What started it?’

‘Ritson, or whatever they call him, was there looking mean as a bear at waking time. Took him a couple of drinks and started shouting about the hooded riders. Then Haben come in and Ritson accused him of being one of us. When Haben denied it, that damned deputy called him a liar and slapped his face. I don’t know if the metzel aimed to draw or not, but his hand moved down, and Ritson shot him dead.’

‘Where’s Ritson now?’ Dusty demanded.

‘Still at the saloon, or was when I left. The sheriff come in, heard what happened and said it was self-defense, then walked out again.’

‘Hold hard there, Dusty!’ Mark snapped as the small Texan began to turn. ‘It’s likely a trap.’

‘Could be, but I reckon somebody has to take it up for Dutchy Haben.’

‘You’re not going without us,’ Mark warned.

‘That’s for sure,’ Stone went on and the rest rumbled their agreement.

‘All right,’ Dusty said. ‘I never figured on going alone. Only this’s how we’ll play it.’

~*~

Standing alone in the center of the small saloon's bar counter, Ritson poured another drink down his throat. The anger at what he felt sure was his failure to keep Belle under observation the previous night still throbbed at him. That feeling had led indirectly to Haben's death, for Ritson came out looking for a fight and picked on a man he felt sure he could handle. At Spargo's suggestion he remained in the saloon, hoping that the hooded riders would show up and try to take revenge. He had drunk just enough to give him confidence and the knowledge that he was covered added to it. Placed so that they could watch the rear entrance and both side doors, the other two deputies guarded him, while Spargo and three State Police officers hid across the street ready to cut in at the first sign of trouble.

'Where're all these tough hooded riders?' Ritson shouted, seeing the left side door open but deciding from the lack of commotion that nobody important was entering. 'Come on, you rebel scum. You're brave enough against Negroes. Where are you when a man calls you out?'

'Right here,' replied a voice from the open left door.

Cold shock hit the deputy as he turned to face the speaker. He saw a hooded figure before him, menacing despite the fact that its guns still rode in the holsters. Down lashed Ritson's hand, repeating the move it had made when he killed Haben. Only he no longer faced an untrained German sodbuster.

In many ways the scene paralleled that when Haben died, for Dusty was as much better with a gun than Ritson had been to the German. Leaping across to the right side Colt, Dusty's left hand drew, cocked and fired it all in that single, apparently effortless way that only the real top-gun ever achieved. Although he gave no sign of taking aim, and shot by instinctive alignment over a distance of almost forty feet, his bullet drove into the center of Ritson's chest. Sent sprawling backwards, his Adams barely clear of leather, Ritson crashed to the floor and his blood stained the sawdust.

'Dutchy Haben wasn't one of us,' Dusty said and backed out of the door, slamming it behind him.

Instantly he flung himself towards the rear of the building. So fast did he move that it is doubtful whether any bullet coming after him would have struck home. However, none of the room offered to start shooting. Even the few soldiers in the bar sat immobilized by what they had seen. Possibly none of the occupants felt like cutting in and regarded Dusty's action as simple justice that the law of the area could not, or would not, offer.

Not so Spargo. He charged into the saloon, saw his deputy sprawled on the floor and yelled for information. Already his two companions from the street were darting along the left side alley with drawn guns. They found nothing to shoot at and skidded to a halt alongside where Baker sprawled on the ground. Hooves drummed in the

night. Not just one set but many and all taking different directions.

‘Which way’d he go?’ roared Spargo, bursting out of the left door after learning it had been the one used by the hooded rider.

‘Every damned which-aways,’ growled one of the State Police. ‘Listen!’

By that time the sound of the hooves was fading rapidly into the distance, but Spargo saw what the man meant. With so many riders departing, there could be no certain way of knowing which way the man who shot Ritson had gone.

‘Where’re Baker and Spurgis?’ the sheriff demanded, coming forward.

A low groan partially answered the question. Holding his back with one hand while the other rubbed his neck, at the places where Dusty had struck the blows to render him unconscious, Baker crawled slowly and painfully to his feet. At the other end of the building, a knot on his skull testifying to how well the Ysabel Kid had carried out Dusty’s orders, Spurgis moaned his way back to consciousness.

‘How bad’re they hurt?’ Spargo asked.

‘Likely they’ll both live,’ the police officer answered, wondering at the concern showed for the deputies’ welfare.

Humanitarian thoughts did not cause the question; Spargo regarded the deputies as a necessary evil to be used and accepted until more suitable men came along. However, he knew that the work planned for later that

night required the services of all his staff. The death of Ritson reduced his manpower, but he felt that the remaining pair ought to be sufficient for his needs.

‘We’ve lost that feller who gunned Ritson,’ the officer said after helping the deputies to their feet.

‘There’ll be time to find him again later,’ Spargo replied. ‘You’ll be riding out soon, won’t you?’

‘Sure will. Say, fancy Smethurst coming along with us on it.’

‘It was his idea, he maybe wants to make sure it’s done right,’ Spargo answered. ‘Anyway, on a thing this dangerous it’s as well that we all have a hand.’

‘Sure is,’ the officer agreed fervently. ‘Reckon your boys’ll be all right for it?’

‘If they’re not, we’ll have to go without them,’ Spargo replied, holding down a grin as he saw how the felling of the deputies aided his own plan. ‘Let’s get them down to the office so they can rest up.’

Knowing of the plan so cryptically discussed by the lawmen, Belle Boyd slipped out of her hotel room’s window with considerable ease of mind. With Ritson dead and the other three members of the sheriff’s office riding on the mission at Smethurst’s side, she ought to be able to move with some freedom. For all that, she dressed in her male clothing, wore her gun belt and carried the lower section of her parasol handle in her right hand. It was no longer a piece of feminine frippery, but a deadly weapon. Telescoped into the handle lay a spring-loaded, metal-headed billy

similar to the one she had used to kill an alligator and save Dusty's life during their river trip to New Orleans. She left her wig topping a dummy made of baggage and covered with the blankets of her bed.

Despite the extreme urgency of the situation, she retained her caution on the brief trip from town. She wondered whether Ritson had passed on his suspicions and doubted if he had for the sheriff showed no interest in her. So she hurried away from town with slightly less than her usual care. However, she saw no sign of anybody following her and took the most direct route towards the deserted cabin. If she had happened to be looking back, her complacency might have received a severe jolt. From behind came a triple flicker of light as if somebody had unhooded and then covered a lantern in some kind of signal. Failing to see it, Belle walked on at a good speed.

Slowing down as she passed through the trees towards the building, Belle looked around for some sign of Dusty's presence. A faint sound came to her ears as she approached the cabin's door. Turning, she saw a shape closing rapidly on her and suddenly realized it to be bigger than Dusty. Nor did its general shape fit in with any of the floating outfit or Wedge she had seen.

Although she held the billy, she hesitated to make use of it on what might turn out to be a friend. Just too late she discerned that the man behind her was Deputy Baker. Lacking the time to draw out and lash around the billy, she whipped up her right leg in a vertical toe kick. Trained in

savate, the deadly foot-and-fist fighting of the French Creoles, Belle knew how to pack considerable force behind her kick. The toe of her boot struck Baker in the groin, tumbling him backwards in doubled-over agony.

Before Belle could do more, either to escape or scream a warning in case Dusty might be in the vicinity, she heard the door open. A hand clamped hold of each shoulder, the position of the thumbs warning that they belonged to two different men. Then she was jerked into the room. Desperately she flicked the billy away, hoping that it would land where Dusty stood a chance of seeing it on his way to the cabin.

‘You’re too smart for a soft-shell girl, “Montoon”,’ snarled Spargo’s voice from her left side. ‘But not quite sm—’

Like a flash Belle stamp-kicked sideways. The heel of her boot struck the sheriff’s shin with enough force to bring a yelp of pain and release of her shoulder. However, the other man acted almost as fast. Still holding her, he shot out his other fist. Hard knuckles collided with the side of her jaw, snapping her head to one side. Her last thought as she collapsed into the blackness that roared over the flashing lights in her head was of the deadly dangerous news she must pass on to the hooded riders.

Sixteen - They'll Blame the Hooded Riders

Wanting to ask Belle a favor, Mark Counter accompanied Dusty to the rendezvous that night. They followed the usual procedure of leaving the horses in a sheltered, well-hidden place and completed the journey on foot. Everything at the cabin appeared normal enough, but the way they approached it prevented them from seeing the girl's discarded billy. Followed by Mark, Dusty stepped into the cabin and tried to pierce the darkness with his eyes. A faint scuffling sound came to their ears, causing them to halt. Even as their hands dropped towards the waiting guns, a light lanced from the center of the room and half-blinded them.

Something hissed through the air, crashing on to Dusty's head, tumbling him to the floor. Mark sensed the presence of the man at his side. Then he too went down, clubbed by Baker.

From where he stood holding the lamp, Spargo watched the two men felled by his deputies. While he had expected only one of the hooded riders to arrive, he had placed both his men in position and felt pleased with his forethought. Triumph and satisfaction showed on his face as he looked at

the two Texans. When credit came to be given for the capture, he aimed to claim more than his fair share.

Belle guessed correctly when assuming that Ritson had not shared his suspicions with the sheriff. However, the man had said enough before he died of his wound for Spargo to take notice and start thinking. Looking back on the whole affair, he had come to realize that 'Miss Montoon' stood the best chance of gaining access to items of interest and use to the hooded riders. From what Ritson said, he had first suspected the girl while watching her handle the Negroes during the Dalkins' investigation. Spargo could never remember seeing a liberal-intellectual, such as 'Miss Montoon' claimed to be, who possessed that knack. Other things came into place; enough for the sheriff to decide that Belle bore watching.

Then he saw an opportunity to plan her downfall. While he could not imagine how, he knew that the girl would most probably know of Smethurst's latest scheme. In which case she was sure to pass on the information to the hooded riders. The shooting of Ritson gave Spargo his chance. Guessing that the girl expected him and the deputies to ride with Smethurst, Spargo did nothing to change her mind. Telling Smethurst that his deputies could not make the trip, he used a lame horse as an excuse to let the other men involved ride on.

After some thought, Spargo guessed at where Belle met her contact. Leaving Baker to watch the rear of the hotel, the sheriff and Spurgis made for the cabin. The flashing

lantern signal told them that she was coming. After capturing and securing her, they waited in the dark for the man she came to meet.

‘Any more of them around?’ the sheriff hissed, having doused the light once it had served its purpose.

‘Can’t hear any,’ Baker replied from the open door.

‘I don’t reckon they’d chance having too many come here,’ Spargo guessed. ‘Get the big lamp lit and let’s see what we’ve got.’

Spurgis obeyed and light flooded into the room. With a gag in her mouth, Belle stood on tiptoe in the center of the room, her arms drawn up, apart and lashed to the beam. None of the trio as much as looked at her, being more interested at that moment in examining their two victims. Bending down, Baker rolled Mark over and unbuckled his gunbelt. When Spurgis turned Dusty, he stared hard and let out a low snarl.

‘This short cuss’s the one who jumped us in the Bonham saloon.’

‘The one who stood at least *six* foot six and weighed all of three hundred pounds?’ Spargo sneered, recalling the vivid description given by his deputies to excuse their failure.

‘I’ll fix him g—!’ Spurgis began.

‘If he comes to before you’ve got his guns and roped him up, you’ll wish he hadn’t,’ interrupted the sheriff.

Clearly the argument packed plenty of weight with Spurgis. Putting aside his desire to stomp the small Texan into the floorboards, the deputy unbuckled and removed

the gunbelt. Then he looked at the bone-handled Army Colts.

‘I’ll be damned!’ he breathed. ‘I’ll bet this’s the feller who made wolf-bait of Ritson.’

‘Ritson was no slouch either,’ commented Baker, having completed the disarming of Mark. ‘Come on, let’s get them lashed up.’

Keeping a wary eye on Belle, for Baker had given a profane testimony to her *savate* skill, Spargo removed her gag. Then he nodded to where his deputies had raised Mark ready to fasten him to the beam.

‘I’d say these are two of the hooded riders’ top hands,’ he remarked.

‘I never saw them before,’ Belle answered.

‘Maybe they’ll feel the same way about you—at first.’

Taking the rope knotted about Mark’s right wrist over the beam, the deputies fastened it to his left. In their hurry to secure Dusty, the men failed to notice that Mark sagged against the rope instead of being held erect like the girl. Raising Dusty, the deputies lashed him into position in between Mark and Belle, hands above his head and feet barely touching the floor.

Although his Stetson had broken the main force of the blow, Dusty did not recover in time to prevent himself being tied up. At first the room seemed to be whirling about him, then it settled down and he saw just what kind of a fix he was in. One look told him that he had never been in a

tighter spot. Twisting his head, he saw that Mark had also recovered and understood the gravity of the situation.

‘So you’re the leader of the hooded riders,’ Spargo said, standing before Dusty with hands on hips.

‘Am I?’ the small Texan countered.

Stepping forward, Baker drove his fist into Dusty’s belly. Pain knifed into Dusty, but he could do nothing to lessen it.

‘I’m going to enjoy this,’ the deputy sneered, whipping a backhand low across Dusty’s face. ‘Don’t talk too soon, beef-head.’

Then he flung himself backwards as Dusty tried to kick him. Spargo shot out a hand, caught the deputy’s arm and halted him as he started forward to resume the attack.

‘You’ll get nowhere like that,’ the sheriff stated.

‘Reckon the big un’ll talk easier?’ Baker replied.

‘They’ll both talk—if we ask them through the girl here,’ Spargo answered and nodded to where a riding quirt lay by the wall alongside the Texan’s gunbelts. ‘Go get it and ask her.’

‘That’s fine with me,’ Baker said, touching himself where Belle kicked him.

‘Listen good to me, you two,’ Spargo told the Texans while Baker collected the quirt. ‘I want to know where the rest of your bunch is. Their names, your names and who’s behind you.’

‘You wouldn’t believe we’re just a couple of cowhands passing through and looking for a place to spend the night, would you?’ Dusty asked.

‘Don’t fuss me!’ Spargo snarled. ‘It’s the girl who’ll suffer. Show them what I mean, Baker.’

Grinning evilly, the deputy swung the quirt around. Dusty saw the lash bite into Belle’s shoulders, heard her sudden intake of breath and noted the way her spine arched in pain. Yet no sound left her to tell just how much the blow hurt.

‘You bastard!’ Dusty gritted. ‘You cheap, gutless, soft-shell bastard.’

‘That’s not what I want to know,’ Spargo answered and nodded.

Again the quirt laced across Belle’s shoulders. Apart from a deeper hiss of breath and sharper curvature of the spine, she gave no sign of feeling it.

‘Southrons hear your country call you,’ she gasped. ‘Up lest worse than death befall you, To arms, to ar-rms, to arms in Dixie.’

The extension of the second ‘arms’ came as the quirt bit home again. Looking past her raised arm, she stared straight at Dusty and shook her head. She did not know if there was any hope of escape, but realized that giving the required information would achieve nothing. Spargo did not intend to take them in for trial, they knew too much for that. Talking would only hasten their deaths, although Belle doubted if her own demise would come quickly. So she gritted her teeth against the pain, screwed up her eyes to hold back the tears and silently prayed that Dusty would hold down his feelings.

'I thought you Southern scum were supposed to be chivalrous gentlemen,' Spargo said. 'Tear her shirt off, strip her to the waist, we'll see how the sight of her blood works.'

That was the kind of order Baker felt competent to handle. He moved around the girl, ready, willing and eager to obey his boss.

All through the whipping Mark had remained immobile. Now he slowly stood erect and studied the manner in which he was fastened. The rope was too short for him to reach one hand over to the knot on the other wrist. Nor could he move forward in an attempt to free Dusty. Not only would the lawmen see him, but a support came down from the roof to the beam between where he and the small Texan stood. Wondering if he could work his hands free, he moved them down a little and gripped the top of the beam. Like Dusty, Mark was seething with fury at the treatment Belle had received and the latest threat acted like a spur to a nervous horse.

Exerting all his giant strength, Mark gave a sudden wrenching tug at the beam. Never had he thrown so much concerted effort into one move and the effect proved mighty spectacular. With a sharp crack, the beam split apart like a busted matchstick. Before the others realized what had happened, the rope securing Mark's wrists had slipped over the broken end of the beam. Though still bound, he could move with considerable freedom. Just how much freedom Spurgis rapidly discovered.

Under orders to keep watch for more of the hooded riders, Spurgis had neglected his duty. In his eagerness to watch Belle's whipping, he had left the window and moved forward. Nor did his brain take in the fact that Mark was free quickly enough to be of use. The thought that any man could snap the stout beam had never entered his mind and even when seeing it done he could barely believe his eyes.

Falling back a pace or two, Spargo screamed a warning and reached for the Smith and Wesson in his waistband. At the sound, Spurgis' reactions triggered him into motion. Down dropped his right hand to the Colt on his hip and it lifted from leather.

Mark linked his fingers and swung his arms, driving the hands with all his might under Spurgis' jaw. Lifted from his feet by the force of the blow, the deputy hurled headlong across the room to smash into the wall. His revolver fell from open fingers and on the collision he dropped rag-doll limp to the floor.

After striking Spurgis, Mark flung himself in a rolling dive for the Colt. Scooping it up in his two hands as he landed, the blond giant rolled over and brought it up. Flame lashed from Spargo's Smith and Wesson and the light-caliber bullet sliced through the knot of Mark's bandanna without touching his flesh. Then he shot back, driving lead into the sheriff's head, aimed for an instant kill.

Seeing Mark break free, Baker started to spring past Belle with the intention of cutting the blond giant down. The girl braced herself on the left toes and kicked the

deputy in his stomach. Giving a croak of pain, Baker doubled over and stumbled on past Belle. Dusty thrust himself upwards, caught hold of the beam and swung from the floor. With superb timing he drove out both feet. All his strength went behind the move, smashing the heels of his boots into the side of Baker's head. Shooting off at a tangent, the deputy hit the wall and collapsed. 'Did he get you, Mark?' Dusty asked.

'I don't reckon so,' the blond giant answered, rising. 'Let me make sure they're out of the game before I set you free.'

The check established that there was no need for further precautions. Spargo lay dead with a bullet in his head. Examination of Spurgis showed his neck and jaw to be broken, the top of his skull crushed in like a heel-stomped rotten apple. Nor did Baker, although still alive, show any greater sign of making trouble. Knowing the penalty for failure, Dusty had not attempted to pull his kick and one boot's heel impacted on the deputy's temple with considerable force. Baker never recovered consciousness and died while Mark was cutting the other two free.

'How bad did they hurt you, Belle?' Mark asked, steadying the girl as the rope parted. 'Let me—'

'There's no time for that,' she gritted, fighting to prevent showing the pain which tore at her. 'We've got to move fast.'

'Reckon there're more of them about?' Dusty inquired as he buckled on his gunbelt.

'No. This afternoon a courier came to the Fort with word that Generals Grant, Sherman, Sheridan and Handiman are

coming down this way on a hunting trip. They've only a small escort and're headed for Fort Andrew.'

'So?'

'So Smethurst and some of his supporters intend to attack them—dressed like cowhands and wearing hoods.'

'The hell you say!' Dusty breathed.

All too well he could realize the effect of the killings. The first three officers, and to a lesser extent Handiman, stood high in public esteem. During his term as President of the United States, Grant had increased the popularity he gained during the Civil War. Maybe the liberals and radicals hated him, but moderate and clear-thinking supporters of the Union went along with the majority in their high regard for his ability as soldier and politician. Nor did Sherman and Sheridan rank much lower in popularity.

News that they had been murdered, apparently by hooded Southerners, would stir up a wave of hatred north of the Mason-Dixon line. The public would scream for reprisals. Even if an actual resumption of hostilities did not materialize, the bonds of reconstruction were certain to be intensified and continue. Wiping out four of the leading moderates would also give the radicals and liberal-intellectuals a better chance of gaining control of the Government. If that happened, everything Ole Devil and the other Southern leaders were working for was doomed to failure.

'We have to stop them!' Mark stated, showing that he also understood the situation. 'But how to do it's the thing.'

‘You said it. What do you know about this, Belle?’

‘Enough, Dusty. The man who helped me through this affair said the generals are camping the night on the Pebble Fork of the Red, down where it joins the main river. They’ve heard about this work of yours and are waiting for an escort from Fort Andrew. Only Smethurst hasn’t sent the escort out. Instead he plans to jump them at breakfast tomorrow.’

‘Let’s get moving, Mark, we might be able to make it,’ Dusty said. ‘You go back to the hotel, Belle.’

‘Like hell!’ she replied. ‘I’ve been in this thing from its start and I intend to see it through to the end.’

‘But your back—!’ Mark began, looking at the marks on her shirt and imagining the state of the flesh underneath.

‘It hurts, I’ll grant you,’ she replied. ‘But lying in bed at the hotel won’t make it feel any better. And my place is with you. There’re things I can do and you can’t.’

Grins of admiration flickered across the Texans’ faces as they looked at the girl.

‘Damned if I believed it possible, but I’ve met a cuss just as awkward as you, Dusty,’ Mark said, setting his hat on.

‘She’s mighty set once she makes her mind up,’ Dusty admitted. ‘So let’s stop wasting time trying to talk sense to her and get moving.’

‘That’s the first sensible word either of you’s said,’ Belle commented as she buckled on her gun belt and snuggled the Dance into its holster. ‘Let’s go. We’ve a lot of miles to cover before morning.’

‘Let’s hope we make it in time,’ Mark said as he headed for the door.

‘We’ve *got* to make it,’ Dusty warned. ‘Even if we kill every horse to do it.’

Seventeen - That Drunken Swine, Grant

Sitting his horse in the cover of clumps of bushes, General Smethurst looked down at the small camp alongside where the Pebble Fork ran into the Red River, on the Texas side of the border with Oklahoma. A feeling of satisfaction filled him, partially soothing his resentment at Sheriff Spargo's failure to rejoin the party. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. After an easy ride through the night, they had made camp beyond hearing distance of their proposed victims and had moved in with the first light. Down below, the four generals squatted on their haunches eating breakfast and their small escort, a scout and six soldiers, gathered at a second fire.

'All set?' Smethurst asked the nearest of his men and received a nod in reply. 'Let's go then.'

Twelve horses lunged forward over the rim and went down the slope in a rush intended to swamp the unsuspecting camp below. Smethurst saw the consternation his men, hooded and waving revolvers, caused among the generals' party. None of them appeared to have arms close at hand. Before they could reach their weapons and make a fight, Smethurst hoped to kill at least all four generals and the scout. For the rest, he did not care how many of the

escort also died; as long as one remained to lay blame on the hooded riders.

Not that Smethurst intended to take any chances. Once he had started the attack, he slowed his horse and allowed the others to go in front of him. Thoughts of the future flickered before him, rosy dreams of a country run in keeping with his lofty ideals. With the deaths of Grant, Sherman and Sheridan, major obstacles would be removed from the path to his dream's fulfillment.

At which point things began to go wrong. Much bush-, tree- and rock-dotted land separated Smethurst's party from their victims. A man more versed in such matters would have tried to move in closer before launching his attack. The separating ground offered numerous places where men might hide—as Smethurst's companions learned to their cost.

Rifles and carbines crashed in a volley from behind various pieces of cover. Two of the attackers and a third's horse went down under a hail of lead. Desperately the others tried to haul their mounts to halt, seeing hooded shapes rise into sight before them.

Belle Boyd would never forget that wild ride through the night. After leaving the cabin, she went with Dusty and Mark to their camp. Telling the other Texans of the latest development, Dusty ordered them to prepare for moving. With the pick of the Wedge's remuda supplying relay mounts, they began their desperate race against time.

During the war, Belle had made many a long, hard ride, but none equaled the dash from Fort Andrew to the Pebble Fork of the Red River. She prided herself on possessing above average ability as a horsewoman and needed every bit of her skill to avoid slowing down her companions.

Ranging ahead of the others, the Kid located Smethurst's party camped for the night. Wanting indisputable proof of Smethurst's guilt, Dusty decided not to make a move until the attack on the four generals' camp began. So he ordered his companions to halt and grab what rest they could. Then he went on with the Kid to study the lie of the land. From what he saw, Dusty formed his plan. Leaving their horses, he and the others moved silently through the pre-dawn blackness and hid in a line before the camp. When Smethurst launched his assault, the Texans were in a position to break it with their saddle-guns.

As the first volley ripped into the charging ranks, Belle saw the rear-most rider rein in savagely, swing his horse and head back up the slope. Despite the hood, she recognized him. The way he allowed the other men to take the chances and ran at the first hint of failure were typical of Smethurst. He, of all the attackers, must not be allowed to escape.

'Dusty! she called and, on attracting the small Texan's attention, pointed towards the departing figure.

Carbine at his shoulder, Dusty looked in the required direction. Like Belle, he realized that the fleeing man must be Smethurst and sought for a means to prevent the

escape. If possible Dusty wanted to take Smethurst alive, not kill him.

With its rider shot out of the saddle, a fine-looking brown horse raced on down the slope. Letting his carbine fall, Dusty hurled from cover as the horse drew near. His hands closed on the saddlehorn and he swung himself astride the brown. Its rider had apparently been trained cavalry-fashion, for the reins were looped around the horn. Freeing them, Dusty gained control of the horse and turned it in Smethurst's direction.

Revolver in hand, a hooded man charged at Dusty. Before the small Texan could draw and shoot, the Ysabel Kid saw his predicament and took a hand. The deadly Winchester altered its aim and cracked. Dusty saw a hole appear between the eyeholes of the hood, staining redly as the rider slid sideways out of the saddle. Then Dusty went by and continued to urge the brown up the slope. No shot came his way and none of the enemy made further attempts to halt him.

Seeing her chance, Belle—wearing a hood Chow Willicks had made in the hope that he might find a chance to use it—sprang forward and caught a horse. Ignoring the fighting, she turned her borrowed mount and went after Dusty.

In making the sudden turn Smethurst had injured his horse. At first it ran well and he felt certain that he could escape. Nor did he experience any fear at the sight of another hooded man following him. Turning in his saddle for a better look, he received a shock. The brown horse

belonged to the leader of the State Police involved in the attack, a tall, handsome and dapper dandy—only he no longer sat it. In addition to lacking the police officers's height, the rider wore his pants cowhand style hanging outside his boots. None of Smethurst's companions had dressed in such a manner, or wore a gunbelt carrying white handled Colts.

Satisfied that an enemy followed, Smethurst gave thought to escaping. He swung to his front and urged the horse on. Then he felt the first warning signs of distress. Sliding the revolver from his holster, he twisted in the saddle and tossed a shot at his pursuer. Then another hooded shape topped the rim and followed. An enemy most likely; none of his men would be loyal enough to try to help. Twice more Smethurst fired, but no man could hope for better than a very lucky hit while shooting backwards from a galloping horse on rough ground. Stumbling, his horse almost threw him. To save his balance he dropped the revolver, then with control regained he tried to increase the animal's speed.

A better rider as well as weighing less, mounted on a good and healthy horse, Dusty closed on Smethurst. Nor did the injury to the other's horse go unnoticed. Slight though it might be, it slowed Smethurst and the gap between them shortened rapidly.

Pulling his foot from the stirrup iron, Dusty rose on to his saddle and hurled himself across at Smethurst. Desperately the man tried to swing his horse away. Then Dusty's body struck him and bore him from the saddle. They went down

together, but Dusty landed better than Smethurst and rolled clear. Bounding to his feet, Dusty sprang forward. As Smethurst tried to rise, Dusty whipped around a *tegatana* blow to the back of his neck. The hood broke the force of the blow and Smethurst lunged forward to catch Dusty's legs and bring him down. Too late the general saw that the second rider had arrived. Rearing up to fling himself on to Dusty, he heard the thunder of hooves.

Belle left her saddle while the horse still ran, landing with cat-like agility and bounding forward. Up lashed her left foot, catching Smethurst under the jaw with enough force to throw him sideways. As the man landed limply on the ground, Dusty sat up.

'Did you reckon I couldn't handle him, Belle?' he asked.

'I just felt that somebody ought to pay for how my back feels,' the girl answered. 'The shooting's finished.'

'Sure. We'd best be going back.'

'I've brought my ring along. Let's make sure that he doesn't wake up too quickly, shall we?'

~*~

Night had come and a sick, aching Smethurst found himself led into a cabin. He did not know where he might be, and a blindfold over his eyes prevented him from learning. On its removal, he stood blinking in the light and at last made out details of the room. Behind a table in the center sat four hooded figures of varied shapes and builds, while his captor stood between two of them. Other hooded men hovered in the background and his second attacker

stood close by. Looking again at the latter, Smethurst realized he faced a woman.

‘Smethurst,’ said the small, standing man. ‘We’ve brought you here to stand trial for what you planned to do to Texas.’

‘And what might that be?’

With growing fury Smethurst listened to his question’s answer and could hardly believe so much of his plan had been discovered. At last he let out a snarl of rage.

‘All right, so I planned it. Why shouldn’t I? We fought you Southern scum and beat you. Then that idiot Lincoln intended to let you get back on your feet. He meant to treat you rebels leniently, so we stopped him.’

‘You?’ Dusty growled in obvious disbelief.

‘I helped arrange to have him killed. Some of our people goaded John Wilkes Booth into the killing so that Andrew Johnson could assume the presidency. Johnson was a man. He knew how to treat your kind. He didn’t know of our plan, but we knew he meant to try every one of your leaders and have them hanged for treason. So we left the way open for Booth. And with Lincoln dead that drunken swine, Grant, had to intervene.’

Dusty knew that President Johnson had been forced by General Grant to honor the surrender terms accorded to General Lee at the Appomattox Court House, but said nothing. The silence made Smethurst continue, ignoring the slight stirring of the stocky, middle-sized man at Dusty’s right side.

‘Johnson had the right idea. Hang your leaders and smash you down as reprisals for your rebellion. But Grant refused. So did Sherman and Sheridan—and the fools up North followed their lead.’

‘So you planned to kill them down here and blame us for it?’ asked the tall, slim, seated man.

‘That’s right. It would have started a wave of hatred up North and this time there would be nobody to stop us.’

‘Only you failed,’ Dusty drawled.

‘What do you intend to do about it?’ Smethurst spat back.

‘Take you to trial for trying to murder President Grant and the other generals.’

‘And who’ll take the word of a pack of hooded Southern scum against me, a general in the United States Army?’

‘They’d listen to me,’ put in the bulkiest of the sitting men and pulled off his hood to reveal the tanned features of General Handiman, currently assumed to be the figurehead commander of the Adjutant-General’s Department.

‘Handiman!’ Smethurst snarled. ‘I always knew you were a rebel sympathizer and traitor.’

‘Am I one, too?’ asked the smallest of the seated quartet, and the removal of his hood showed him to be ‘little Phil’ Sheridan.

‘Or me?’ demanded the tall, slim, third man in General Sherman’s voice.

Even without the last of the four speaking, before he took off the hood, Smethurst knew him to be General U. S. Grant, President of the United States. Then Smethurst saw

his chance. It seemed that the woman believed him to be harmless for she was standing with folded arms, her revolver very close to his hand. With all the desperate courage of a cornered rat, Smethurst lunged sideways. His plan only partially succeeded. Although the hooded woman swayed aside enough to avoid his reaching left hand, his right closed on and drew the Dance from her holster.

Despite his surprise at Belle's apparent carelessness, Dusty acted with his usual speed. Out came his right side Colt, crashing an instant before Smethurst could line the Dance at Grant. Struck in the head by Dusty's bullet, Smethurst went over backwards and the Dance dropped from his lifeless hand.

'Lord, how could I have been so careless?' Belle gasped, bending to pick up her gun.

'Maybe it was for the best,' Handiman answered. 'Bringing him to a court-martial wouldn't've done anybody any good.'

An hour later Dusty stood with Belle on the banks of the Red River near the cabin they had borrowed to stage the trial.

'It's over, Dusty,' the girl said. 'The Negroes will be told there's no land available out here—'

'And'll think they've been sold down the river, but not by Smethurst's kind,' Dusty replied, holding the hood in his hands. 'The soft-shells may mean well, Belle, but they foul up everything they touch.'

‘Yes,’ agreed the girl. ‘You know I let him grab my gun, don’t you?’

‘I figured you had.’

‘It’s a dirty game I play, Dusty. There’re no rules. My only regret is that I had to use you.’

‘Like you say. It’s a dirty game,’ Dusty drawled and looked at the hood for a moment. Then he hurled it into the river. ‘I hope I never have to wear one again.’

‘So do I,’ Belle agreed. ‘But with Smethurst dead and the franchise to be returned, I don’t think the hooded riders need ride anymore.’

Author's Note

The hooded riders did not return. When the Davis administration was voted out of office the need never arose. Try as he might, Dusty failed to obtain proof of what had happened the day Sheriff Waggets died. Before Wes Hardin could be brought to trial and cleared of the charge, he gained the reputation of being a killer. Driven beyond the law, he finally died, another victim to the stupidity and bigotry called 'Reconstruction'.

THE FLOATING OUTFIT 9
THE HOODED RIDERS

By J. T. Edson

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[vi](#) Told in Comanche.

[vii](#) Told in The Ysabel Kid.

[viii](#) A'he: I claim it.

[ix](#) Liberadical: Derogatory name for a liberal with radical tendencies.

[x](#) Told in Quiet Town.

[xi](#) Told in the Waco series.

[xii](#) Told in The Colt and the Saber.

[xiii](#) Told in The Bloody Border.

[xiv](#) An organization that smuggled Negroes from the South to Anti-Slavery States.

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